

# ON THE STAIRS

HENRY B. FULLER



CORNELL  
UNIVERSITY  
LIBRARY



BOUGHT WITH THE INCOME  
OF THE SAGE ENDOWMENT  
FUND GIVEN IN 1891 BY  
HENRY WILLIAMS SAGE

Cornell University Library  
PS 1727.O58 1918

On the stairs /



3 1924 021 987 379

olin



Cornell University  
Library

The original of this book is in  
the Cornell University Library.

There are no known copyright restrictions in  
the United States on the use of the text.





## On the Stairs





# On the Stairs

by

Henry B. Fuller

Author of *Lines Long and Short*



BOSTON AND NEW YORK  
HOUGHTON MIFFLIN COMPANY

*The Riverside Press* Cambridge

1918

**COPYRIGHT, 1918, BY HENRY B. FULLER**

**ALL RIGHTS RESERVED**

*Published March 1918*

## AUTHOR'S NOTE

THIS volume may seem less a Novel than a Sketch of a Novel or a Study for a Novel. It might easily be amplified; but, like other recent work of mine, it was written in the conviction that story-telling, whatever form it take, can be done within limits narrower than those now generally employed.



# ON THE STAIRS

## PART I

### I

IN the year 1873 —

No, do not turn away from such an opening; I shall reach our own day within a paragraph or so.

In the year 1873, then, Johnny McComas was perfectly willing to stand to one side while Raymond Prince, surrounded by several of the fellows, came down, in his own negligent and self-assured way, the main stairway of Grant's Private Academy. For Johnny was newer there; Johnny was younger in this world by a year or two, at an age when a year or two makes a difference; and Johnny had but lately left behind what might be described as a condition of servitude. So Johnny yielded the right of way. He lowered his little snub nose by a few degrees, took some of the gay smile out of his twinkling

## ON THE STAIRS

blue eyes, and waited with an upward glance of friendly yet deferential sobriety until Raymond should have passed.

"How are you, Johnny?" asked Raymond carelessly.

"I'm pretty well," replied Johnny, in all modesty.

In the year 1916 —

Yes, I told you we should reach our own times presently.

In the year 1916, then, Raymond Prince was standing to one side, whether willing or not, while John W. McComas, attended by several men who would make their cares his own, came down the big marble stairway of the Mid-Continent National Bank. Raymond, who had his cares too, would gladly have been included in the company (or, rather, have replaced it altogether); but he saw clearly that the time was not propitious. McComas looked out through this swarm of lesser people, half-saw Prince as in a mist, and gave him unsmilingly an abstracted half-bow.

"How do you do?" he mumbled impersonally.

## ON THE STAIRS

"I'm pretty well," returned Prince, in a toneless voice. But he was far from that, whether in mind or estate.

Between these two dates and these two incidents lies most of my story. Be quite sure that I shall tell it in my own fashion.

### II

First, however, this: I do not intend to magnify the Academy and its stairway. The Academy did very well in its day, and it happened to be within easy distance of James Prince's residence. If its big green doors were flanked on one side by a grocery and on the other by a laundry, and if its stairway was worn untidily by other feet than those of Dr. Grant's boys, I shall simply point out that this was all in the day of small things and that Fastidiousness was still upon her way. Should this not satisfy you, I will state that, in the year following, the Academy moved into other quarters: it lodged itself in a near-by private residence whose owner, in real estate, sensed down-heeled Decadence stealing that way a few years before any of his neighbors

## ON THE STAIRS

felt it, and who made his shifts accordingly. If even this does not satisfy you, I might sketch the entrance and stairway, somewhere in Massachusetts, which are to know the footfalls of Lawrence D. McComas, aged ten, grandson of Johnny; but such a step would perhaps take us too far afield as well as slightly into the future. One does not pass a lad through *that* gateway on the spur of the moment.

Nor ought I to magnify, on the other hand, the marble stairway of the Mid-Continent. This was not one of the town's greater banks; and the stairway was at the disposal not only of the bank's clientèle, but at that of sixteen tiers of tenants. However, it represented some advanced architect's ideal of grandeur, and it served to make the bank's president seem haughty when in truth he was only preoccupied.

As you may now surmise, this story, even at its highest, will not throw millions on the habituated and indifferent air; nor, at its most distended, will it push the pride of life too far. That has been done already in suf-



## ON THE STAIRS

ficing measure by many others. Let us ride here an even keel and keep well within rule and reason.

I am simply to tell you how, as the years moved on, John McComas climbed the stairs of life from the bottom to the top — or so, at least, he was commonly considered to have done; and how, through the same years, Raymond Prince passed slowly and reluctantly along the same stairs from top to bottom — or so his critics usually regarded his course. Nor without some color of justice. I presume that they will pass each other somewhere near the middle of my volume.

### III

In 1873 James Prince was living in a small, choice residential district near the Lake. Its choiceness was great, but was not duly guarded. The very smallness of the neighborhood — a triumphant record of early fortunes — put it upon a precarious basis: there was all too slight a margin against encroachments. And, besides, the discovery came to be made, some years later, that it was upon

## ON THE STAIRS

the wrong side of the river altogether. But it held up well in 1873; and it continued to do so through the eighties. Perhaps it was not until the middle or later nineties that the real exodus began. Some of the early magnates had died; some had evaporated financially; others had come to perceive, either for themselves or through their children, that the road to social consideration now ran another way. In due course a congeries of bulky and grandiose edifices, built lavishly in the best taste of their own day, remained to stare vacantly at the infrequent passer-by, or to tremble before the imminent prospect of sinking to unworthy uses: odd, old-time megatheriums stranded ineptly in their mortgage-mud. But through the seventies the neighborhood held up its head and people came from far to see it.

James Prince lived in one of these houses; and, around the corner, old Jehiel Prince lingered on in another.

James was, of course, Raymond's father. Jehiel was his grandfather. Raymond, when we take him up, was at the age of thirteen.

## ON THE STAIRS

And Johnny McComas, if you care to know, was close on twelve.

Jehiel Prince was of remote New England origin, and had come West by way of York State. He had been born somewhere between Utica and Rochester. He put up his house on no basis of domestic sociability; it was designed as a sort of monument to his personal success. He had not left the East to be a failure, or to remain inconspicuous. His contractor — or his architect, if one had been employed — had imagined a heavy, square affair of dull-red brick, with brown-stone trimmings in heavy courses. Items: a high basement, an undecorated mansard in slate; a big, clumsy pair of doors, set in the middle of all, at the top of a heavily balustraded flight of brown-stone steps; one vast window on the right of the doors to light the “parlor,” and another like it, on the left, to light the “library”: a façade reared before any allegiance to “periods,” and in a style best denominated local or indigenous. Jehiel was called a capitalist and had a supplementary office in the high front basement; and here he was fretting

## ON THE STAIRS

by himself, off and on, in 1873; and here he continued to fret by himself, off and on, until 1880, when he fretted himself from earth. He was an unhappy man, with no essential mastery of life. His wife existed somewhere upstairs. They seldom spoke — indeed seldom met — unless papers to shift the units of a perplexed estate were up for consideration. Sometimes her relatives stole into the house to see her and hoped, with fearfulness, not to meet her husband in some passageway. He himself had plenty of relatives, by blood as well as by marriage; too many of these were rascals, and they kept him busy. The town, in the seventies, was at the adventurous, formative stage; almost everybody was leaving the gravel walks of Probity to take a short cut across the fair lawns of Success, and the social landscape was a good deal cut up and disfigured.

“Poor relations!” — such was Jehiel’s brief, scornful rating of the less capable among these supernumeraries. A poor relation represented, to him, the lowest form of animal life.

## ON THE STAIRS

And when the chicane and intrigue of the more clever among them roused his indignation he would exclaim: "They're putting me through the smut-machine!" — an ignominious, exasperating treatment which he refused to undergo without loud protests. These protests often reduced his wife to trembling and to tears. At such times she might hide an elder sister — one on the pursuit of some slight dole — in a small back bedroom, far from sight and hearing.

An ugly house, inhabited by unhappy people. Perhaps I should brighten things by bringing forward, just here, Elsie, Jehiel's beautiful granddaughter. But he had no granddaughter. We must let Elsie pass.

Yet a fresh young shoot budding from a gnarled old trunk would afford a piquant contrast — has done so hundreds of times. Jehiel Prince undoubtedly *was* gnarled and old and tough; a charming granddaughter to cajole or wheedle him in the library, or to relax his indignant tension over young men during their summer attendance on swing or hammock, would have her uses. Yet a swing,

## ON THE STAIRS

or a hammock would suggest, rather than the bleak stateliness of Jehiel's urban environment, some fair, remote domain with lawns and gardens; and Jehiel was far from possessing — or from wanting to possess — a country-house. Elsie may be revived, if necessary; but I can promise nothing. I rather think you have heard the last of her.

James lived a few hundred yards from his father; his house bulked to much the same effect. It was another symmetrical, indigenous box — in stone, however, and not in brick. It had its mortgage. If this mortgage was ever paid up, another came later — a mortgage which passed through various renewals and which, as values were falling, was always renewed for a lesser amount and was always demanding ready money to meet the difference. In later years Raymond, with this formidable weight still pressing upon him, received finally an offer of relief and liberation; some prosperous upstart, with plans of his own, said he would chance the property, mortgage and all, if paid a substantial bonus for doing so.

## ON THE STAIRS

The premises included a stable. I mention the stable on account of Johnny McComas. He lived in it. Downstairs, the landau and the two horses, and another horse, and a buggy and phaeton, and sometimes a cow; upstairs, Johnny and his father and mother. Johnny could look out through a crumpled dimity curtain across the back yard and could see his father freezing ice-cream on a Sunday forenoon on the back kitchen porch; and he could also look into one of Raymond's windows on the floor above.

Every so often he would beg:—

“Oh, father, let me do it, — please!”

Then he would lose the double prospect and get, instead, a plate of vanilla with a tin spoon in it.

Raymond, who had no mastering passion for games, sat a good deal in his room, sometimes at one of the side windows; occasionally at the back one, in which case Johnny was quite welcome to look. Raymond had more desks than one, and books everywhere on the walls between them. He had a strong bent toward study, and was even beginning

## ON THE STAIRS

to dip into literary composition. He studied when he might better have been at play, and he kept up his diary under a student lamp into all hours of the night. He had been reading lately about Paris, and he was piecing out the elementary instruction of the Academy by getting together a collection of French grammars and dictionaries. He had about decided that sometime he would go to live on that island in the Seine near Notre Dame.

His father told him he was working too hard and too late — that it would hurt his health and probably injure his eyes. His mother made no comment and gave no advice. She was an invalid and thus had absorbing interests of her own. Raymond kept on reading and writing.

Perhaps I should begin to sketch, just about here, his awakening regard for some Gertrude or Adele, and his young rivalry with Johnny McComas for her favor; telling how Johnny won over Raymond the privilege of carrying her books to school, and how, in the end, he won Gertrude or Adele herself from Raymond, and married her. Fiddlesticks! Please put



## ON THE STAIRS

all such conventional procedures out of your head, and take what I am prepared to give you. The school was a boys' school. There was no Gertrude or Adele — as yet — any more than there was an Elsie. Raymond kept to his books and indulged in no juvenile philanderings. Forget all such foolish stereotypings of fancy.

As for the romance and the rivalry: when that came, it came with a vast difference.

### IV

Jehiel Prince was a capitalist. So was James: a capitalist, and the son of a capitalist. They had some interests in common, and others apart. There was a bank, and there were several large downtown business-blocks whose tenants required a lot of bookkeeping, and there was a horse-car line. There was a bus-line, too, between the railroad depots and the hotels. James destined Raymond for the bank. He would hardly go to college, but at seventeen or so would begin on the collection-register or some such matter; later he might come to be a receiving-teller; pretty

## ON THE STAIRS

soon he might rise to an apprehension of banking as a science and have a line as an official in the *Bankers' Gazette*. Beyond that he might go as far as he was able. James thought that, thus favored in early years, the boy might go far.

But Raymond had just taken on Rome, and was finding it even more interesting than Paris. The Academy's professor of ancient history began to regard him as a prodigy. Then, somehow or other, Raymond got hold of Gregorovius, with his "City of Rome in the Middle Ages" — though his teacher did not know of this, and would have been sure to consider it an undesirable deviation from the straight and necessary path; and thenceforth the dozens of ordinary boys about him counted, I feel sure, for less than ever.

Do you know what I'm going to do? I'm going to put myself into the story as one of the characters. Then the many I's will no longer refer to the author named on the title-page, but will represent the direct participation — direct, even though inconspicuous — of a person whose name, status, and general

## ON THE STAIRS

nature will be made manifest, incidentally and gradually, as we proceed. You object that though one's status and general nature may be revealed "gradually," such can scarcely be the case as regards one's name? But if I tell you that my Christian name is, let us say, Oliver, and then intimate in some succeeding section that my surname is Ormsby, and then do not disclose my middle initial — which may be W — until the middle of the book (in some documentary connection, perhaps), shall I not be doing the thing "gradually"?

Oliver W. Ormsby. H'm! I'm not so sure that I like it. Well, my name may turn out, after all, to be something quite different. And possibly I may be found to be without any middle initial whatever.

But to return to the method itself. You will find it pursued in many good novels and in many bad ones; with admirable discretion — to make an instance — in "The Way of All Flesh"; and the procedure may be humbly copied here. It will involve, of course, a rather close attendance on both Raymond

## ON THE STAIRS

and Johnny through a long term of years; but perhaps the difficulties involved — or, rather, the awkwardnesses — can be got round in one way or another.

At the Academy we like Raymond well enough, on the whole —

You see at once how the method applies: I make myself an attendant there, and I place my age midway between the ages of the other two.

As I say, we liked Raymond well enough, yet did not quite feel that he coalesced. “Coalesced” was hardly the word we used — such verbal grandeurs were reserved for our “compositions”; but you know what I mean. Another point to be made clear without delay is this: that when Johnny appeared at the Academy, he had lately left behind him the previous condition of servitude involved in a lodgment above the landau, the phaeton, and sometimes the cow. His father and mother, as I saw them and remember them, appeared to be rather nice people. Perhaps they had lately come from some small country town and had not been able, at first, to realize

## ON THE STAIRS

themselves and their abilities to the best advantage in the city. Assuredly his father knew how to drive horses and to care for them; and he had an intuitive knack for safeguarding his self-respect. And Johnny's mother was perfectly competent to cook and to keep house — even above a stable — most neatly. If Johnny's curtain was rumpled, that was Johnny's own incorrigible fault. The windowsill was a wide one, and Johnny, I found, used it as a catch-all. He kept there a few boxes of "bugs," as we called his pinned-down specimens, and an album of postage-stamps that was always in a state of metamorphosis. He had some loose stamps too, and sometimes, late in the afternoon or on Saturdays, we "traded." Johnny's mother was likely to caution us about her freshly scrubbed floors, and sometimes gave me a cooky on my leaving. I never heard of Raymond's having been there.

But presently the trading stopped, and the "bugs," however firmly pinned down, took their flight. Johnny's father and mother "moved" — that was the brief, unadorned,

## ON THE STAIRS

sufficing formula. It was all accepted as inevitable; hardly for a boy a little past twelve, like myself, to question the movements of Olympian elders; nor even, in fact, to feel an abiding interest in them when I had seen them but three or four times in all. I never speculated — never asked where they had come from; never considered the nature of their tenure (not wondering how much Johnny's father may have been paid for driving the two bays and washing the parlor and bedroom windows and milking the cow, when there was one, and not figuring the reduction in wages due to the renting value of the three or four small rooms they occupied); nor did I much concern myself as to whither they might have gone. Probably opportunity had opened up a more promising path. However, the path did not lead far; for Johnny, a month or two later, made his first appearance at the Academy, on the opening of the fall term. During the preceding year he had been going to a public school "across the tracks" and had played with a boisterous crowd in a big cinder yard.

## ON THE STAIRS

Therefore, when Raymond, surrounded by half a dozen other boys, took occasion, on the stairs, to say:—

“How are you, Johnny?”—

And Johnny, with his back to the wall of the landing, replied:—

“I’m pretty well,”—

Johnny may have meant that, despite the novelty and the strangeness of his situation, he was very well, indeed; feeling, doubtless, that he was finally where he had a right to be and that his alert face was turned the proper way.

The boys about Raymond were asking him to take part in a football game. It was not that Raymond was especially popular; but he could run. In that simple day football was football—principally a matter of running and of straightforward kicking; and Raymond could do both better than any other boy in the school. He could also outjump any of us—when he would take the trouble to try. In fact, his physical faculties were in his legs; his arms were nowhere. He was never able to throw either far or straight. Some of his early

## ON THE STAIRS

attempts at throwing were met with shouts of ridicule, and he never tried the thing further. If he fell upon the ill luck of finding a ball in his hands, he would toss it to somebody else with an air of facetious negligence. To stand, as Johnny McComas could stand, and throw a ball straight up for seventy-five feet and then catch it without stirring a foot from the spot where he was planted, would have been an utter impossibility for him. In fact, Raymond simply cultivated his obviously natural gifts; he never exerted himself systematically to make good any of his deficiencies. He was so as a boy; and he remained so always.

In those early days we had no special playgrounds. We commonly used the streets. There was little traffic. Pedestrians took their chances on the sidewalks with leapfrog and the like, and we took ours, in turn, in the wide roadway with "pom-pom-peel-away" and similar games. Football, however, would take us to a vacant corner lot, some two streets away. Some absentee owner in the East was doubtless paying taxes on it with hopes of finally recouping himself



## ON THE STAIRS

through the unearned increment. Meanwhile it ran somewhat to rubbish and tin cans, to bare spots from which adjoining homemakers had removed irregular squares of turf, and to holes in the dry, brown earth where potatoes had been baked with a minimum of success and a maximum of wood ashes and acrid smoke. It was on the way to this frequented tract that Raymond carelessly let fall a word about Johnny McComas. Perhaps he need not have said that Johnny had lately been living above his father's stable — but he spoke without special animus. A few of the boys thought Johnny's intrusion odd, even cheeky; but most of them, employing the social assimilability of youth, — especially that of youth in the Middle West, — laid little stress upon it. Johnny made his place, in due time and on his own merits. Or shall I say, rather, by his own powers?

### V

You are not to suppose that while I was free to visit Johnny in the stable, I was not free to visit Raymond in the house. Though

## ON THE STAIRS

my people lived rather modestly on a side street, the interior of the Prince residence was not unknown to me. On one occasion Raymond took me up to his room so that I might hear some of his writings. He had been to Milwaukee or to Indianapolis, and had found himself moved to set down an account of his three days away from home. He led me through several big rooms downstairs before we got to his own particular quarters above. The furnishing of these rooms impressed me at the time; but I know, now, that they were heavy and clumsy when they were meant to be rich and massive, and were meretricious when they were meant to be elegant. It was all of the Second Empire, qualified by an erratic, exaggerated touch that was natively American. I am afraid I found it rather superb and was made uncomfortable — was even intimidated by it; all the more so that Raymond took it completely for granted. One room contained a big orchestrion with many pipes in tiers, like an organ's. On one occasion I heard it play the overture to "William Tell," and it managed

## ON THE STAIRS

the "Storm" very handily. There was a large, three-cornered piano in the same room — one of the sort I never could feel at home with; and this instrument, more than the other, I suppose, gave Raymond his futile and disadvantageous start toward music. Travel; art; anything but the bank.

I have no idea at what time of day he introduced me into the house, but it was an hour at which the men, as well as the women, were at home. In one part or another of the hall I met his mother. She was dark and lean; without being tall, she looked gaunt. She seemed occupied with herself, as she moved out of one shadow into another, and she gave scant attention to a casual boy. Raymond was really no more hospitable than any young and growing organism must be; but perhaps she was thankful that it was only one boy, instead of three or four.

In another room, somewhere on the first floor, I had a glimpse of his father. I remember him as a sedate man who did not insist. If he set a boy right, it was done but verbally; the boy was left to see the justness of

## ON THE STAIRS

the point and to act on it for himself. I gathered, later, that James Prince had done little, unaided, for himself; whatever he had accomplished had been in conjunction with other men — with his father, particularly; and when his father died, a few years later, he was the chief heir — and he never added much to what he had received. To him fell the property — and its worries. The worries, I surmise, were the greater part of it all. Everything has to be paid for, and James Prince's easily gained success was paid for, through the ensuing years, with considerable anxieties and perturbations.

It was his father, I presume, who was with him as I passed the library door: a bent, gray man, with a square head and a yellow face. A third man was between them; a tall, dry, cold fellow with iron-gray beard and no mustache — a face in the old New England tradition. This man was, of course, their lawyer, and I judge that he gave them little comfort. I felt him as chill and slow, as enjoying the tying and untying of legalities with a stiff, clammy hand, and as unlikely to be hurried

## ON THE STAIRS

on account of any temperament possessed by himself or manifested by his clients. Fire, in a wide sweep, had overtaken the town a year or two before — a community owned by the Eastern seaboard and mortgaged to its eyebrows; and the Princes, as I learned years later, had been building extensively on borrowed capital just before the fire-doom came. Probably too great a part of the funds employed came from their own bank.

Raymond, once the second floor was reached, showed me his desks and bookcases; also a new sort of pen which he had thought to be able to use, but which he had cast aside. And he offered to read me his account of the three days in Milwaukee, or wherever.

“If you would like to hear . . . ?” he said, with a sort of bashful determination.

“Just as you please,” I replied, patient then, as ever after, in the face of the arts.

Nothing much seemed to have happened — nothing that I, at least, should have taken the trouble to set down; but a good part of his fifteen pages, as he read them, seemed interesting and even important. I suppose this

## ON THE STAIRS

came from the way he did it. As early as thirteen he had the knack; then, and always after, he enjoyed writing for its own sake. I feel sure that his father did not quite approve this taste. His grandfather, who had had a lesser education and felt an exaggerated respect for learning, may have had more patience. He talked for years about endowing some college, but never did it; when the time finally came, he was far too deep in his financial worries.

James Prince, as I have noted, occasionally mentioned to Raymond his conviction that he was wasting his time with all this scribbling, and that so much work by artificial light was imperiling his eyesight.

"What good is it all going to do you?" I once heard him ask. His tone was resigned, as if he had put the question several times before. "I don't think I'd write quite so much, if I were you."

Raymond looked at him in silence. "Not write?" he seemed to say. "You might as well ask me not to breathe."

"At least do it by daylight," his father

## ON THE STAIRS

suggested, or counseled, — scarcely urged. “You won’t have any eyes at all by the time you’re thirty.”

But Raymond liked his double student-lamp with green shades. He liked the quiet and retirement of late hours. I believe he liked even the smell and smear of the oil.

His father spoke, as I have reported; but he never took away the pen or put the light out. The boy seemingly had too strong a “slant”: a misfortune — or, at least, a disadvantage — which a concerned parent must somehow endure. But he did take a more decided tack later on: he never said a word about Raymond’s going to college, and Raymond, as a fact, never went. He fed his own intellectual furnace, and fed it in his own way. He learned an immense number of useless and unrelated things. In time they came to cumber him. Perhaps college would have been better, after all.

I never knew Raymond to show any affection for either of his parents; and he had no brothers and sisters. His father was an essentially kind, just man, and might have

## ON THE STAIRS

welcomed an occasional little manifestation of feeling. One day he told Raymond he had no heart. That was as far as emotion and the expression of emotion could carry him. Raymond's mother might have been kindly too, if she had not had herself. But a new doctor, a new remedy, a new draught from a new quarter — and her boy was instantly nowhere. Raymond's own position seemed to be that life in families was the ordained thing and was to be accepted. Well, this was the family ordained for him, and he would put up with it as best he might. But I kept on developing my own impression of him; and I see now just what that impression was going to be. Raymond, almost from the start, felt himself as an independent, detached, isolated individual, and he must have his little zone of quiet round him. Why in the world he should ever have married . . .!

I never knew him to show gratitude for anything given him by his parents. On the other hand, I never heard him ask them for anything. He possessed none of the little ingenuities by which boys sometimes secure



## ON THE STAIRS

a bit of pocket-money. If he wanted anything, he went without it until it was offered. Frankly, he seldom had to wait long.

Not that what came was always the right thing. He showed me his fountain-pen — one of the early half-failures — with some disdain. He always carried a number of things in his pocket, but never the pen. I myself tried it one day, and it went well enough; I should have been glad to have it for my own. But steel pens sufficed him; save once, when I saw him, in a high mood, experimenting fantastically with a quill one.

He cared no more about his clothes than any of the rest of us. He never laid any real stress on them at any time of life. He developed early a notion of the sufficiency of interior furnishings; mere external upholstery never quite secured his interest. I heard his father once or twice complain of his looking careless and shabby. He waited with equanimity until his father could take him to the clothier's. He asked but one thing; that there should be no indulgence in sartorial

## ON THE STAIRS

novelties at his expense. And I never met a sedater taste in neckties.

Three or four were hanging over the gas-jet, close to the window; they were all dark blues or grays, and most of them frayed. He expected a new one about Christmas; no hurry.

From that window, across the back yard, we saw Johnny McComas, in a bright new red tie, busy at his own window. I waved my hand, and he waved back. Raymond looked at him, but made no special sign. Johnny was packing up his specimens and his postage-stamps, preparatory to the family hegira, though neither of us knew.

## VI

Raymond, who might have asked for almost anything, asked for nothing. Johnny, who was in position to ask for next to nothing, asked for almost everything. He was constantly teasing his parents, so far as my observation went; and his teasing was a form of criticism. "You are not doing the right thing by me" — such might have seemed his plaint.

## ON THE STAIRS

He was beginning to spread, to reach out: acquisitiveness and assimilativeness were to be his two watchwords. He hankered after the externalities; he wanted "things." If it was only a new stamp-album, he wanted it hard, and he said so. I shall not go so far as to say that he hectored his parents into sending him to our school. They were probably feeling, on their own account, that they had come to town for better things than they had been getting; and likely enough they met his demands halfway. There was usually a certain element of cheeriness in his nagging; but the cheeriness was quite secondary to the insistence.

"Oh, come, mother!" or, "Oh, father, now!" was commonly Johnny's opening formula, employed with a smile, wheedling or protesting, as the occasion seemed to require.

And, "Oh, well . . .!" was commonly the opening formula for the response — meaning, in completed form, "Well, if we must, we must."

However, his parents were probably ready to meet with an open mind the scorings of

## ON THE STAIRS

their young, sole critic, thinking that his urgency might advance themselves no less than him. Well, in the autumn Johnny turned up at the Academy with an equipment that included everything approved and needed; and he was not long in letting us know that his father was manager in the supply-yard of a large firm of contractors and builders. His father had spent his earlier married years, it transpired, about the grounds of a small-town "depot," and knew a good deal in regard to lumber and cement.

To most of us fathers were fathers and businesses were businesses — things to be accepted without comment or criticism. Our own youthfulness, and the social tone of the day and region, discouraged either. If I thought anything about it, I must have thought, as I think still, that it was a manly and satisfying matter to come to grips with the serviceable actualities of the building trades. Construction, in its various phases, still seems to me a more useful and more tonic concern than brokerage, for example, and similar forms of office life.

## ON THE STAIRS

Johnny soon suggested that I go with him, some Saturday afternoon, to the "yard." I asked Raymond to join us. Raymond had just come on Gothic architecture and was studying its historical phases. He was picking up points about the English cathedrals and was making drawings to illustrate the development of buttresses and of window tracery. The yard was only a mile and a half away and the three of us frolicked loosely along the streets until we got there. Johnny's father was going about the place in an admirable pair of new blue overalls, and carried a thick, blunt pencil behind one ear. He showed an independent, breezy manner that had not been very marked before. He was loud and clear and authoritative, and kept a dozen or more stout fellows pretty busy. Once an elderly man in a high silk hat passed through the yard on his way to its little office. He stopped, and he and Johnny's father had some talk together. "Yes, sir!" said Johnny's father, with considerable emphasis and momentum. I enjoyed his "Yes, sir!" It was pleasant to find

## ON THE STAIRS

him so hearty and so well-mannered. He seemed to have escaped from something and to be glad of it. The man in the high hat hardly tried to stand up against him. As he turned away he smiled in a curious fashion; and I thought I heard him say to himself, as he moved back toward the door of the shed that had the sign "Office" on it: "I wonder whether I'm going to run him, or whether he's going to run me?"

Johnny was all eyes for a tall stack of lathing in bundles and for a pile of sacks filled with hair from cows' hides, which last was to go into plaster. Raymond looked at these objects of interest — and at several others — with some degree of abstractedness. The English cathedrals, as I was told later, had not been plastered. Raymond had already developed some faculty for entertaining a concept freed from clogging and qualifying detail; and this faculty grew as he grew. He liked his ideal *net*; facts, practical facts, never had much charm for him. I remember his once saying, when about twenty-three, that he should have liked to be an architect, but that

## ON THE STAIRS

plumbing and speaking-tubes had turned him away. If he could have drawn façades and stopped there, I think he might have been quite happy and successful in the profession.

Johnny pulled a lath for each of us out of one of the bundles, and we used them in our tour of the yard as alpenstocks. We found a glacier in the shape of a mortar bed and were using the laths to sound its depths, when Johnny's father appeared from round the corner of a lumber pile. He clapped his hands with a loud report.

"Here! that won't do!" he said; and none of us thought it remotely possible to withstand him. "Enough for one morning," he added, and he waved both arms with a broad scoop to motion us toward the street gate.

"Oh, father, now!" began Johnny (with no smile at all), conscious of his position as host.

"No more, to-day," said his father. "School six days a week would be about my idea."

Raymond said nothing, but drew up his mouth to one side and himself led us toward the street.

## ON THE STAIRS

### VII

I would not seem to stress either the saliency or the significance of these incidents. I simply put them down, after many years, just as they return to my memory. Memory is sporadic; memory is capricious; memory is inconsequent, sometimes forgetting the large thing to record the little. And memory may again prove itself all these, and more, if I attempt to rescue from the past a children's party.

It was my young sister who "gave" it, as our expression was; parents in the background, providing the funds and engineering the mechanism, were not allowed greatly to count. The party was given for my sister's visitor, a little girl from some small interior town whose name (whether child's or town's) I have long since forgotten. Raymond was invited, of course; — "though he isn't very nice to us," as my sister ruefully observed; and some prompting toward fair play (as I vaguely termed it to myself) made me suggest Johnny McComas. He came.

There must have been some twenty-five



## ON THE STAIRS

of us — all that our small house would hold. There were more games than dances; and the games were largely “kissing” games: “post-office,” “clap-in, clap-out,” “drop the handkerchief,” and such-like innocent infantilities. Some of us thought ourselves too old for this sort of thing, and would willingly have left it to the younger children; but the eager lady from next door, who was “helping,” insisted that we all take part. This is the place for the Gertrudes and the Adeles, and they were there in good measure, be-bowed and be-sashed and fluttering about (or romping about) flushed and happy. And this would be pre-eminently the place for Elsie, Jehiel’s granddaughter and Raymond’s cousin. Elsie would naturally be, in the general scheme, my childhood sweetheart; later, my fiancée; and ultimately my wife. Such a relationship would help me, of course, to keep tab more easily on Raymond during the long course of his life. For instance, at this very party I see her doing a polka with Johnny McComas, while Raymond (who had been sent to dancing-school, but had steadfastly refused to “learn”) views

## ON THE STAIRS

Johnny with a mixture of envy and contempt. A year or two later, I see Elsie seated in the twilight at the head of her grandfather's grandiose front steps, surrounded by boys of seventeen or eighteen, while Raymond, sent on some errand to his grandfather's house, picks his way through the crowd to say to himself, censoriously, in the vestibule: "Well, if I can't talk any better at that age than they do . . .!" Yes, Elsie would undeniably have been an aid; but she never existed, and we must dispense with her for once and for all.

Raymond could always make himself difficult, and he usually did so at parties. To be difficult was to be choice, and to be choice was to be desirable. Therefore he got more of the kisses than he might have got otherwise — many more, in fact, than he cared for. But on this occasion a good part of his talent for making himself difficult was reserved until refreshment time. Most of the boys and girls had paired instinctively to make a prompt raid on the dining-room table, with Johnny McComas unabashedly to the fore; but Raymond lingered behind. My mother presently

## ON THE STAIRS

found him moping alone in the parlor, where he was looking with an over-emphatic care at the pictures.

“Why, Raymond dear! Why are n’t you out with the others? Don’t you want anything to eat?”

No; Raymond did n’t want anything.

“But you do — of course you do. Come.”

Then Raymond, thus urged and escorted, — and, above all, individualized, — allowed himself to be led out to the refreshments; and, to do him justice, he ate as much and as happily as any one else. Johnny McComas, with his mouth full, and with Gertrudes and Adeles all around him, welcomed him with the high sign of jovial *camaraderie*.

Yes, Johnny took his full share of the ice-cream and macaroons; he got his full quota of letters from the “post-office”; the handkerchief was dropped behind him every third or fourth time, and he always caught the attentive little girl who was whisking away — if he wanted to. He even took a manful part in the dancing.

“What a good schottische!” exclaimed one

## ON THE STAIRS

of the Adeles, as the industrious lady from next door, after a final bang, withdrew her hands from the keyboard. "And how well you dance!"

"Gee!" exclaimed Johnny, with his most open-faced smile; "is that what you call it — a schottische? I never tried it before in my life!"

"Learn by doing" — such might have been the motto of the town in those early, untutored days. And Johnny McComas emphatically made this motto his own.

## PART II

### I

RAYMOND went into the bank; not in due course, but rather more than a year later. After seeing some of his more advanced school-fellows depart for Eastern colleges, after indulging a year of desultory study at home, and after passing a summer and autumn among the Wisconsin lakes, he was formally claimed by Finance. There was no Franciscan ardor to clasp her close, as others have clasped Poverty and Obedience. He began his business career, as men have been recommended to begin their matrimonial career, with a slight aversion. However, his aversion never brought him any future good.

His year at home, so far as I could make out, was taken up largely with æsthetics and music. He read the "Seven Lamps of Architecture" and they lighted him along a road that led far, far from the constructional practicalities of the yard where we had spent a

## ON THE STAIRS

Saturday forenoon, some five years before. He had begun to collect books on the brickwork of Piacenza and Cremona, and these too led him farther along the general path of æstheticism. During our years at the Academy the town, after an unprecedentedly thorough sweep by fire, had been rebuilding itself; and on more than one Saturday forenoon of that period we had tramped together through the devastated district, rejoicing in the restorative activities on every hand and honestly admiring the fantasies and ingenuities of the "architects" of the day. But Raymond had now emerged from that innocent stage; summoning forth from some interior reservoir of taste an inspirational code of his own, he condemned these crudities and aberrations as severely as they probably deserved, and cultivated a confident belief that somewhere or other he was to find things which should square better with his likings and should respond more kindly to his mounting sensibilities.

"Not going to cut us?" I once asked.  
"Just as we're picking up, too?"

But Raymond looked abstractedly into the

## ON THE STAIRS

distance and undertook no definite reply. Possibly he had responded to Ruskin; more probably to some divine young sense of truth and fitness such as forms the natural endowment, by no means uncommon, of right-minded youth. Or it may be that he had simply reached the "critical" age, when Idealism calls the Daily Practicalities to its bar and delivers its harsh, imperious judgments; when it puts the world, if but for a few brief months, "where it belongs." His natural tendency toward generalization helped him here — helped, perhaps, too much. He passed judgment not only on his parents, whom he had been finding very unsatisfactory, and on most of his associates (myself, for example, whenever I happened to speak an appreciative word for his essentially admirable father), but on the community as such. A filmy visitant from Elsewhere had grazed his forehead and whispered in his ear that the town allotted to him by destiny was crude, alike in its deficiencies and in its affirmations, and that complete satisfaction for him lay altogether in another and riper quarter.

## ON THE STAIRS

Perhaps it was some such discontent as this that led him in the direction of musical composition — or toward attempts at it. He had no adequate preparation for it, nor, so far as I could perceive, any justificatory call. He had once taken a few terms on the piano; and he had on his shelves a few elementary works on harmony; and he had in his fingertips a certain limited knack for improvisation; and he had once sketched out, rather haltingly, a few simple songs. Yet, all the same, another reservoir, one of uncertain depth and capacity, was opening up for him at an age when opening-up was the continuing and dominating feature of one's days — a muse was stirring the vibrant air about him; and I gathered, after two or three certain visits to his house, that he had embarked on some composition or other of an ambitious and comprehensive nature: a cantata, possibly, or even some higher flight. As he had never domesticated musical theory and musical notation in his brain, most of his composing had to be carried on at the keyboard itself. The big piano in the big open drawing-



## ON THE STAIRS

room resounded with his strumming experiments in melody and harmony — sounds intelligible, often enough, to no ears but his own, and not always agreeable to them. I am sure he tried his parents' patience cruelly. His reiterated phrases and harmonizings were audible throughout a good part of the house. They did nothing toward relieving his mother's headaches, nothing toward raising his father's hopes that, pretty soon, he would come to grips with the elements of Loans and Discounts. Even the servants, setting the table, now and again closed the dining-room door.

"Oh, Raymond, Raymond; *not* to-day!" his mother would sometimes plead.

I presume that, during this period, the diary was still going on; and no one with such a gift for writing will stop short at a diary. In fact, Raymond tried his hand at a few short stories — still another muse was fluttering about his temples. Most of these stories came back; but a few of them got printed obscurely in mangled form, and the failure of the venturesome periodicals sometimes deprived

## ON THE STAIRS

him of the honorarium (as pay was then pompously called) which would have given the last convincing touch to his claims on authorship. He spoke of these stories freely enough to me, but disclaimed all attempts at poetry: short of that field, I believe, he really did stay his hand.

Well, perhaps too many good fairies — good only to the pitch of velleity — buzzed and brushed, like muses, or pseudo-muses, about his brows. All this unsettled him — and sometimes annoyed his daily associates. But how, without these instinctive young passes at Art, could the unceasing, glamorous and needful rebirth of the world get itself accomplished?

## II

As for Johnny McComas, he found one year of our Academy enough. It was the getting in, not the staying in, that provoked his young powers. Our school, moreover, was explicitly classical in a day when the old classical ideal still ruled respected everywhere; and Johnny, much as he liked being with us

## ON THE STAIRS

and of us, could not see the world in terms of Latin paradigms. He wanted to be "doing something"; he wanted to be "in business." During the summer following his year at Dr. Grant's I heard of him as somebody's office-boy somewhere downtown, and then quite lost sight of him for the five years that succeeded.

It occurred to me that Johnny must be doing just the right thing for himself; he would make the sort of office-boy that "business men" would contend for: easy to imagine the manœuvres, even the feuds, that would enliven business blocks in the downtown district for the possession of Johnny's confident smile and dashing, forthright way. I learned, in due season, that Johnny had cast in his lot with a real-estate operator, and had been cherished, through periods harried by competition, as a pearl of price.

The city was emphatically still in the "real-estate" stage. Anybody arriving without profession or training straightway began to sell lots. Nothing lay more openly abundant than land; the town had but to propagate

## ON THE STAIRS

itself automatically over the wide prairies. The wild flowers waved only to welcome the surveyor's gang; and new home-seekers — in the jargon of the trade — were ever hurrying to rasp themselves upon the ragged edges of the outskirts.

One Sunday morning in May, Raymond and I determined on an excursion to the country — or, at all events, to some of the remoter suburbs. The bank would not claim his thoughts for twenty-four hours, nor the law-school mine. We left the train at a promising point and prepared to scuffle over a half-mile splotched with vervain and yarrow, yet to bloom, toward a long, thin range of trees that seemed to mark the course of some small stream. But between us and that possible stream there soon developed much besides the sprinkling of prairie flowers. We began to notice rough-ploughed strips of land that seemed to mean streets for some new subdivision; piles of lumber, here and there, which should serve to realize the ideals of the "home-seekers"; and presently a gay, improvised little shack with a disproportionate

## ON THE STAIRS

sign to blazon the hopes and ambitions of a well-known firm back in town. And in the doorway of the shack stood Johnny McComas.

He was as ruddy as ever, and his blue eyes were a bit sharper. He was slightly heavier than either of us, but no taller. He knew us as quickly as we knew him. For some reason he did not seem particularly glad to see us. He made the reason clear at once.

"They had me out here last Sunday," he said, looking about his chaotic domain disparagingly, "and they say they may have to have me out here next Sunday — somebody's sick or missing. But they won't," he continued darkly. It was a threat, we felt — a threat that would make some presumptuous superior cower and conform. "I really belong at our branch in Dellwood Park, where there *is* something; not out here, beyond the last of everything." And he said more to indicate that his energies and abilities were temporarily going to waste.

But having put himself right in his own eyes and in ours, he began to give rein to his

## ON THE STAIRS

fundamental good nature. Emerging from the cloud that was just now darkening his merits and his future, he asked, interestedly enough, what we ourselves were doing.

I had to confess that I was still a student. Raymond mentioned briefly and reluctantly the bank. It was nothing to him that he, no less than Johnny, was now a man on a salary.

"Bank, eh?" said Johnny. "That's good. We're thinking of starting a bank next year at our Dellwood branch. It's far enough in, and it's far enough out. Plenty of good little businesses all around there. And I'm going to make them let me have a hand in managing it."

This warm ray of hope from the immediate future quite illumined Johnny. He told us genially about the prospects of the venture in the midst of which he was encamped, and ended by feigning us as a young bridal couple that had come out to look for a "home."

"There may be one or two along pretty soon, if the day holds fair; so I might as well keep myself in practice." Then he jocularly let himself loose on transportation, and part

## ON THE STAIRS

payments down, and street improvements "in," and healthful country air for young children. He was very fluent and somewhat cynical, and turned the seamy side of his trade a little too clearly to view.

He explained how the spring had been exceptionally wet in that region, — "which, after all, *is* low," he acknowledged, — and how his firm, by digging a few trenches in well-considered directions, had drained all its standing water to adjoining acres still lower, the property of a prospective rival. Recalling this smart trick made Johnny think better of the people who would maroon him for a succession of Sundays, and he became more genially communicative still.

"That gray streak off to the west — if you can see it — is our water drying up. Better be drying there than here. You can put a solid foot on every yard of our ground to-day. Come along with me and I'll show you your cottage — *domus, a, um*. Not quite right? Well, no great matter."

He pointed toward a yellow pile of two-by-fours, siding, and shingles. "Be sure you

## ON THE STAIRS

make your last payment before you find yourselves warped out of shape."

We followed. Johnny seemed much more expert and worldly-wise than either of us. We held our innocent excursion in abeyance and bowed with a certain embarrassed awe to Johnny's demonstration of his aptitude for taking the world as it was and to his light-handed, care-free way of handling so serious a matter, to most men, as the founding of a home. As we continued our jaunt, I began to feel that I now liked Johnny a little less than I could have wished.

### III

At about this time Raymond and I found ourselves members of a little circle that expressed itself chiefly through choral music. It was almost a neighborhood circle, and almost a self-made circle—it gradually evolved itself, with no special guidance or intention, until, finally, there it was. I, at that period, may have felt that it would verge on the presumptuous to pick and choose—to attempt consciously the fabri-



## ON THE STAIRS

cation of a social environment — and so I adopted with docility the one which presented itself. Raymond, on the other hand, may have felt that even the best which was available was unlikely to be good enough and have accepted fatalistically anything which could possibly be made to do.

Just why our little group of a dozen or so should have united on a musical basis and have expressed itself in a weekly “sing” I might find it hard to explain. None of us fellows was especially blessed with a voice; and the various Gertrudes and Adeles that met with us were assuredly without any marked sanction to vocalize. Possibly the “sing” was the mere outcome of youthful exuberance and of the tendency of young and eager molecules to crystallize into what came, later, to be termed a “bunch.”

As for Raymond himself, he never sang at all. “Oh, come, Rayme; join in!” the other fellows would suggest — and suggest in vain.

“I’m doing *my* part,” he would return, giving the piano-stool a nearer hitch to the keyboard.

## ON THE STAIRS

In fact, it was his specific function to preside at the Chickering, the Weber, the Steinway, according to the facilities offered by the particular home — for we moved about in rotation. This service, which we presently came to consider sufficient in itself, dispensed him from exhibiting his nature in so articulate a thing as actual vocal utterance. This he was quite opposed to: he would never even try a hymn in church. But he could accompany; he could improvise; he could modulate; he could transpose any simple air. The ease and readiness with which he did all this made less obvious — indeed, almost imperceptible — his fundamental unwillingness to abandon himself before others (especially if members of his own circle) to any manifestation that might be taxed with even a remote emotionalism. And yet, at that very time, he was laying the foundations of a claim to be that broad and vague thing called an “artist.” Even as early as this, apparently, he was troubled by two contradictory impulses: he wanted to be an artist and give himself out; and he wanted to be a gentle-

## ON THE STAIRS

man and hold himself in. An entangling, ruinous paradox.

This comment on Raymond's musical inclinations and musical services may require a bit of shading: I believe that, after all, he never quite cared for music unless he had, in all literalness, his "hand" in it. He never liked to hear any one else play the piano, still less the violin; concerts of all sorts were likely to bore him; and he never really rose to an understanding of the more recondite and elaborate musical forms: to have his fingers on the keyboard — especially when improvising in a secure inarticulateness — was his great desideratum.

In our little group we ran from seventeen to nineteen; some of us just finishing high school, others just on the edge of college, others (like myself) engaged in professional studies, and still others making a *début* in business as clerks. We sang mostly the innocent old songs, American or English, of an earlier day, and sometimes the decorous numbers from the self-respecting operetta recently established in London. No contribu-

## ON THE STAIRS

tions from a new and dubious foreign element had yet come to cheapen our taste, to disturb our nervous systems, or to throw upon the negro, the Hawaiian, or the Argentine the onus of a crass passion that one was more desirous of expressing than of acknowledging. No; there was assuredly no excess of emotional life — whether good or bad — in the body of music we favored. Perhaps what our little circle really desired was simply good-fellowship and a high degree of harmonious clamor. Certainly all our doings, whether on Friday evening, or on the other forenoons, afternoons, and evenings of the week, were quite devoid of an embarrassing sex-consciousness. We “trained together,” as the expression went — all the fellows and all the Gertrudes and Adeles — with no sense of *malaise*, and postponing, or setting aside, in the miraculous American fashion, all sexual considerations whatsoever.

I hardly know just why I should have thought that Johnny McComas could be introduced successfully into this circle. Johnny, as he had told us in his suburb, had cut loose

## ON THE STAIRS

from his parents. He was now living on his own, in a neighborhood not far from ours — from his, as it had once been. One evening I ventured to bring him round. He developed an obstreperous baritone — it was the same voice, now more specifically in action, that I had first heard on the devastated prairie; and he made himself rather preponderant, whether he happened to know the song or not.

“Why, you’re quite an addition!” commented one of the girls, in surprise — almost in consternation.

“He is, indeed, — if he does n’t drown us all out!” muttered one of the fellows, behind his back.

Yes, Johnny was vociferous — so long as the singing went on. But he developed, besides an obstreperous voice, an obstreperous interest in one of our Adeles — a piercing soprano who was our mainstay; and he showed some tendency to defeat the occasion by segregating her in a bay window. Segregation was the last of our aims, and Johnny did not quite please. Furthermore, Johnny seemed to feel himself among a lot of boys who were yet to

## ON THE STAIRS

make their "start," overlooking the fact that Raymond was in the bank, and ignorant of the further fact that one of our fellows was just beginning to be a salesman in a bond house. Johnny became violently communicative about the attractions of Dellwood Park and seemed to want to figure demonstratively in the eyes of Gertrude and Adele as an up-and-coming paladin of the business world. To most of us he seemed too self-assertive, too self-assured. He knew too clearly what he wanted, and showed it too clearly. Indeed it became apparent to me that while a boy of twelve may be accepted easily (at least in an early, simple society), a youth of eighteen cannot altogether escape the issues of caste. It was borne in on me presently that Johnny might as well have remained away. In fact —

"We shan't need him again," said the brother of the soprano to me, as the evening broke up.

And Raymond himself remarked to me a day later: —

"Don't push him; he'll get along without your help."

## ON THE STAIRS

### IV

While the rankness of new elements in a new era had not penetrated our homes, it had begun to make itself manifest in public places. The town, within sixty years, had risen from a population of nearly *nil* to a population of some five or six hundred thousand; and it was only in due course, perhaps, that “vice” now raised its head and that a “criminal class” came into effective, unabashed functioning. It was to be many years before the better elements learned how to combine for an efficient opposition to impudent evils. A heterogeneous populace, newly arrived, was still willing to elect mayors of native blood; but one of these, elected and reëlected to the town’s lasting harm, might as well have been of the newer, and wholly exterior, tradition: a genial, loose-lipped demagogue who saw an opportunity to weld the miscellany of discrepant elements into a compact engine for the furtherance of his own coarse ambitions, and who allowed his supporters such a measure of license as was needed to make their support

## ON THE STAIRS

continuing. A shameless new quarter suddenly obtruded itself with an ugly emphasis; unclassifiables, male and female, began to assert and disport themselves more daringly than dreamt of heretofore; and many good citizens who would crowd the town forward to a population of a million and to a status undeniably metropolitan came to stroll these tawdry, noisy new streets with a curiosity of mind at once disturbed, titillated, and somehow gratified. Said some: "This is a new thing; do we quite like it?" Said others: "The town is certainly moving ahead; we don't know but that we do."

Yes, a good many social observers set forth to see for themselves the new phenomena and to appraise the value of them in the coming political and social life of the community. Of course, many of these observers were too young and heedless to draw inferences from the sudden flood of new bars and bright lights and crass tunes and youthful creatures in short skirts who seemed not quite to know whether their proper element was the stage above or the range of tables below; in fact, these ob-



## ON THE STAIRS

servers waived all attempt at speculative thought and became participants.

Raymond and I had heard comments on the new developments from our elders; we were not without our own curiosity (though we had enough fastidiousness not to graze things very close, still less to wade into them very deep), and we decided one evening that we would look into two or three of these new and notable places of public entertainment.

The first of them offered little. The second of them developed Johnny McComas. He sat at a table, talking too familiarly, or at least too forbearingly, with a rubicund, hard-faced man in shirt-sleeves standing at his elbow — probably the head of the place, or his first aide; and he was buying obviously unnecessary glasses of things for two of the young creatures in short skirts — Gertrudes and Adeles of that particular stratum, or Katies and Maggies, if preferred. Johnny sat there happy enough: an early example of the young business warrior diverting himself after the fray. Years afterward the scene came back to me when I met with a showy paint-

## ON THE STAIRS

ing in the resonant new lobby of one of the greater hotels. It showed a terrace overlooking some placid Greek sea; the happy warrior standing ungirt and uncasqued, with a beautiful maiden of indeterminate status seated beside him; a graceful attendant holding a wreath above each happy and prosperous head, and a group of sandaled dancing-girls lightly footing it for the pleasure of the fortunate pair; the whole scene illuminated by the supreme, smiling self-satisfaction of the relaxed soldier amid the pipings of peace. So Johnny; he had earned the money and won the right to spend it in pleasure; his, too, the duty of refreshing himself for the strenuous morrow.

He saw us and nodded. "Life!" — that was what he seemed to say. He made a feint to interest us in his companions; but they were poor things, as we knew, and as he must have known too. He left them without much regret and without much ceremony, and took us on to the next place.

"It's life, is n't it?" he said in so many words.

## ON THE STAIRS

Raymond's nose went up disdainfully. "Life!" Some such manifestations, if properly handled and framed, might be life in Paris, perhaps; but he could not accept them as life here at home, within a mile or two of his own study. What this evening offered him seemed to require a considerable touch of refining before it could reach acceptance. It was all only an imperfectly specious substitute for life, only a coarse parody on life. The town, he told me the next day, made him think of a pumpkin: it was big and sudden and coarse-textured. "I've had enough of it," he added; "I want something different, and something a lot better."

Johnny, as I say, took us to the next place; we might not have known how to take ourselves there. Johnny honestly liked the glare, the noise, the uproarious music, and the human press both on the sidewalks and in the packed, panting interiors. I liked it all, too, — for once in a way; but I soon saw that, for Raymond, even once in a way was once too often. In this last place a girl with a hand too familiarly laid on his arm gave the finishing

## ON THE STAIRS

touch; it was a coarse, dingy little hand, with some tawdry rings. Raymond never liked close quarters; neither in those days, nor ever after, did he care to come decisively to grips with actual life. "Keep off!" was what his look said to the offender. The poor, puzzled little *débutante* quickly stepped back, and we all regained the street. Raymond was trembling with embarrassment and vexation.

"Why, you were making a hit," said Johnny.

"Let's get home," said Raymond to me, ignoring Johnny. "This is enough, and more than enough. What a hole this town is coming to be!"

### V

Raymond stayed on at the bank, though — if one might judge by his words and actions — with no enthusiasm in the present and no hopefulness for the future. He did what he had to do, and did it fairly well; but there was no sign that he was looking forward, and there remained scant likelihood that he would meet the expectations of his father and grandfather

## ON THE STAIRS

by mastering the business. On the contrary, I think he actually set his face against it: he seemed as resolute not to learn banking as he had been resolute not to learn dancing. Professor Baltique and the little girls in light-soled shoes and bright-colored sashes had given him up in the waltz; and it looked as if James B. Prince must presently renounce all hope of his ever learning how to turn the collective spare cash of many depositors to profit. I recall the day when the chief little light of the dancing-class, after some moments of completely static trappings by Raymond in the midst of the floor, suddenly began to pout and to frown, and then left him in the midst of the dance and of the company and came to tears before she could reach an elder sister by the side wall. Raymond accepted the incident without comment. If his demeanor expressed anything, it expressed his satisfaction at carrying a point.

But he did not wait until a vexed and disappointed bank left him high and dry. Though he must have known that many young clerks in the office envied him his billet

## ON THE STAIRS

and that many young fellows outside it would have been glad to get in on any terms whatever, he never gave a sign that he valued his opportunity; and when he finally pulled out it was with no regard to any possible successor.

The younger men in the bank were a rather trim lot, and were expected to be. They did wonders, in the way of dressing, on their sixty or seventy-five dollars a month. Raymond's own dressing, for some little time past, had grown somewhat slack and careless. I did him the injustice of supposing that he felt himself to be himself, and *hors concours* so far as the general body of clerklings was concerned; but he had other reasons.

He had given up buying books and periodicals: no new volumes to be seen in his room except works of travel (preferably guide-books) and grammars and dictionaries of foreign languages. For all such works of general uplift and inspiration as the intending tourist in Europe might expect to profit by, he depended on circulating libraries or the shelves of friends. I myself lent him a book of travels in the Dolomites, and scarcely know, now, whether I did

## ON THE STAIRS

well or ill. Raymond, in short, was silently, doggedly saving, with the intention of taking a trip — or of making a sojourn — abroad.

The cleavage came in James Prince's front parlor, one Sunday afternoon, and I happened to be present. A very few words sufficed. Raymond's father had picked up a thick little book from the centre-table, the only book in the room, and was looking back and forth between this work — an Italian dictionary — and Raymond himself.

"What do you expect to get out of this?" he asked.

"I expect to learn some Italian," Raymond replied.

"Would n't French be more useful?"

"I know all the French I need."

"Where do you expect to use your Italian?"

"In Italy. I did n't go to college."

Impossible to depict the quality of Raymond's tone in speaking these five words. There was no color, no emphasis, no seeming presentation of a case. It was the cool, level statement of a fact; nor did he try to make the fact too pertinent, too cogent. An hour-long

## ON THE STAIRS

oration would not have been more effective. He had calmly taken off a lid and had permitted a look within. His father saw — saw that whatever Raymond, by plus or by minus, might be, he was no longer a boy.

“I know,” said James Prince, slowly. He was looking past us both and was opening and shutting the covers of the book unconsciously.

A day or two later, Raymond gave me the rest. His father had asked him how much money he had. Out of his sixty or seventy-five a month Raymond had set aside several hundreds; “and I said I could make the rest by corresponding for some newspaper,” he continued. This was in the simple day when travel-letters from Europe were still printed and read in the newspapers, and even “remunerated” by editors. Incredible, perhaps, in this day; yet true for that.

His father had asked him how long he intended to be away. Raymond was noncommittal. He might travel for a year, or he might try “living” there for a while — a long while. A matter of funds and of luck, it seemed. His father, without pressing him



## ON THE STAIRS

closely, offered to double whatever sum he had saved up. He appeared neither pleased nor displeased by Raymond's course. He felt I suppose, that the bank would hardly suffer, and that Raymond (whom he did not understand) might get some profit. Fathers have their own opinions of sons, which opinions range, I dare say, all the way from charitableness to desperation. In the case of my own son, I am glad to say, a very slight degree of charitableness was all the tax laid upon me. There were some distressing months of angularity, both in physique and in manners, at seventeen; then a quick and miraculous escape into trimness and grace. And my grandson, now at nine, promises to be, I am glad to state, even more of a success and a pleasure. As for Raymond, he had developed unevenly: his growth had gone athwart. Possibly the "world," that vast, vague entity of which his father's knowledge was restricted almost to one narrow field, might aid in straightening the boy out.

"Well, try it for a year," his father said, not unkindly, and almost wistfully.

## ON THE STAIRS

### VI

When Johnny McComas heard of Raymond's resolve, he drew up his round face into a grimace. He thought the step queer, and he said so. But, "Oh, well, if a fellow can afford it!" he added. And he did not explain just what meaning he attached to the word "afford."

But Johnny could see no valid reason for a fellow's giving the town the go-by at nineteen and at just that stage of the town's development. Johnny was so made that the community which housed him was necessarily the centre of the cosmos; he himself, howsoever placed, was necessarily at the centre of the circle — so why leave the central dot for some vague situation on the circumference? And take this particular town: what a present! what a future! what a wide extension over the limitless prairie with every passing month! — a prairie which merely needed to be cut up into small checkers and sold to hopeful newcomers; a prairie which produced profits as freely as it produced goldenrod and asters; a

## ON THE STAIRS

prairie upon which home-seekers might settle down under agents whose wide range, running from helpful coöperation to absolute flim-flam, need leave no competent "operator" other than rich.

"What are you going to get out of it?" asked Johnny earnestly.

Raymond attempted no set reply. Johnny, he recognized, was out for positive results, for tangible returns; his idea was to get on in the world by definite and unmistakable stages. Raymond never welcomed the idea of "getting on" — not at least in the sense in which his own day and place used the expression. To do so was but to acknowledge some early inferiority. Raymond was not conscious of any inferiority to be overcome. Johnny might, of course, on this particular point, feel as he chose.

About this time old Jehiel Prince began to come more frequently to his son's house. He was yellower and grayer, and he was getting testy and irascible. He sometimes brought his lawyer with him, and the pair made James Prince an active participant in their concerns.

## ON THE STAIRS

However, Jehiel was perhaps less unhappy here than in his own home. When there, he sat moodily alone, of evenings, in his basement office; and Raymond, who was sometimes sent over with documents or with messages, impatiently reported him to me as "glum."

"Poor old fellow! he does n't know how to live!" said Raymond in complacent pity. He himself, of course, had but to assemble all the bright-hued elements that awaited him a few months ahead to make his own life a poem, a song.

"I can do that," he once said, in a moment when exaltation had briefly made him confidential.

Raymond never saw his grandmother — at least he never cared to see her. Here, if nowhere else, he was willing to take a cue, and he took it from the head of the family. He thought that so many years of town life might have made her a little less rustic in the end: the York State of 1835 or of 1840 need not have remained York State so immitigably. And if there was a domestic blight

## ON THE STAIRS

on the house he was willing to believe that she was two thirds to blame: behind the old soul was a pack of poor relations. Particularly a brother-in-law — a bilious, cadaverous fellow, whom I saw once, and once was enough. He had been an itinerant preacher farther East, and he lived in a woeful little cottage along one of Jehiel's horse-car routes. His mournful-eyed wife was always asking help. He too had "gone into real-estate," and unsuccessfully. He was the dull reverse of that victorious obverse upon which Johnny McComas was beginning to shine.

Another of her relatives, a niece, had married a small-town sharper. He had brought her to the larger town, and his sharpness had taken on a keener edge. He, too, had gone into real-estate — a lean, wiry little man, incredibly arid and energetic, and carrying a preposterously large mustache. There was trouble with him after Jehiel's death. It developed that one of the documents which old Beulah Prince had been cajoled or hectored into signing had deeded to him — temporarily and for a specific purpose — some forty

## ON THE STAIRS

acres of purple and yellow prairie flowers, delightful blossoms nodding and swaying in the wind, and that he had refused to deed more than half of them back: his services at that particular juncture were "worth something," he said. Well, life (as may have been remarked previously) would be quite tolerable without one's relatives. Meanwhile the summer flowers bloomed and nodded on, under the windy blue sky, all unaware of their disgrace.

A month after Raymond's decision, flowers (of the sort favored in cemeteries) were trying to bloom over old Jehiel. Some stroke, some lesion, had put a period to the unhappy career of this grim old man. Raymond set to one side, for a few weeks, his new trunk and portmanteau; for a few weeks only — he had no notion of making, ultimately, any great change in his plans. It was obvious that James Prince was looking forward to a year or two of harassing procedure in the courts, for old Jehiel's estate was unlikely to smooth out with celerity; but Raymond was clearly of no use at home, even as a mere source of

## ON THE STAIRS

sympathy. A fortnight after his grandfather's funeral he was off.

The singing-class would have given him good-bye in a special session; but his eyes were now on brighter matters and the vocalizing Gertrudes and Adeles were dim. He got out of it. Besides, the affair might come to involve something like ceremony; and he was always desirous of avoiding (save in the arts) the ceremonial side of life. When he came back from his first sojourn on the Continent he was a young man of mark, as things went in our particular town and time; or, rather, he might have been such, had he but chosen. The family fortunes were then merely at the stage of worry and still far from that of impending disaster. Raymond came back with money, position, and a certain aureole of personal distinction — just the sort of young man who would be asked to act as usher at a wedding. He *was* asked repeatedly; but he never acted, and his excuses and subterfuges for avoiding such a service almost became one of the comedies of the day. He had no relish for seeing himself walking ceremo-

## ON THE STAIRS

nially up a church aisle under the eyes of hundreds, and I knew better than to ask him to walk up any aisle for me. He never did the thing but once, and that was under the inescapable compulsion of his fiancée — who, for her part, insisted on eyes and plenty of them. A man may never cease to be astonished at the workings of feminine preferences on such an occasion, but can hardly escape accommodating himself to them. Gertrudes are Gertrudes.

But the wedding is years ahead, while the departure for Europe is imminent. Raymond had a tepid, awkward parting with his mother, whose headaches would not allow her to go to the train; and he shook hands rather coldly and constrainedly with his father, who would have welcomed, as I guess, some slight show of filial warmth, and he threw an embarrassedly facetious word to me about the weight of his portmanteau, and so was off. And it was years, rather than months, before he came back.



## PART III

### I

WHILE Raymond was taking his course abroad, Johnny McComas was shaping his course at home. A colorless, unbiased statement — as it was meant to be; one which, despite the slight difference between “taking” and “shaping,” has no slant and displays no animus. Colorless, yes; too colorless, perhaps you will object. If so, I will reword the matter. While Raymond, then, was in Europe cultivating his gentler faculties, Johnny remained in America, strengthening certain specific powers. Or, again: while Raymond was preparing, or so he thought, for a desirably decorative place in the “world” (the world at large), Johnny was qualifying himself, as he felt sure, for an important and remunerative position in that particular section of the world to which he had decided to confine his endeavors. And if you ask me, after I have colored a colorless statement, to bias

## ON THE STAIRS

an unbiased one, I shall refuse. I am not taking sides. Each of them was following his own likings — not the worst of rules for a growing and avid organism.

Raymond wrote, of course, — it was impossible that he should not; and I think I showed one or two of his early letters to Johnny. Johnny was not exactly interested; vistas were opened for which he had no eyes and which possessed no appositeness to his own aims.

“Still over there, eh?” he asked, on my producing a second letter. “These are the years that count,” he added. He was probably implying that the final score would make a better showing for the man who spent those years in his native and proper environment.

He disregarded the general drift of the letters, but hit upon one or two novel expressions, and repeated them, half-quizzical, half-intrigued.

“Still over there,” I echoed. A developing nature, I felt, must reach out for whatever it needs; and, in simpler form, I said so.

“Well, I’m no misfit,” he rejoined briefly.

## ON THE STAIRS

To "feel at home" at home — that, I presume, was the advantage he was asserting.

Johnny, "at home," was not long in outgrowing the opportunities of Dellwood Park. Though he did not make, quite yet, the central district, a year or two later found him in an older and more important suburb — one that had passed the first acuteness of speculation and had pretty well settled down to a regulated life. It was not a suburb of the first rank, nor even perhaps of the second; but it suited his tastes and his present purposes. The new business combined banking and real-estate, and the banking department even maintained a small safety-deposit vault. There was also some insurance; and a little of mortgage-broking. Johnny was a highly prized element in this business and was pleased from the start with the outlook.

"A fellow," he said, "can pick up more experience out there in a month than he could in one of these big downtown offices in a year."

Nearly two years passed before I was to see him in his new environment. There came up

## ON THE STAIRS

a bit of business for a suburban client of mine which could as well be settled at Johnny's place as at another. It needed no more than a glance to perceive that Johnny was the dominant factor of the little institution. His was the biggest roller-top seen through a maze of gilt letters on a vast sheet of plate glass by commuters turning the corner morning and evening. His, too, chiefly, the deference of clerks and office-boy. He was ruddy and robust, and seemed likely to impose himself anywhere, when the time came. Thus far, a small Forum, perhaps; but he was the Cæsar in it. He did not disdain to attend to my affair himself; he even showed an emphatic, if not ponderous, *bonhomie*.

Just as I was getting up to leave, a man of forty-five or more, with the general aspect of a contractor's foreman, put in his head. It was Johnny's father.

"I guess you know George Waite," Johnny said to him; "and I guess he knows you."

We shook hands, under Johnny's direction, and said that he was right. His father's hand — rough and with a broken nail or

## ON THE STAIRS

two — was that of a superintendent who on occasion helped with a plank or a mortar-board. He had an open face and a pleasant manner; he was not at all the dominant personage I remembered meeting in that “yard,” years ago. Johnny, it seemed, was putting up a row of small houses on the suburb’s edge, and his father was supervising the job. Johnny was pretty direct in saying what he wanted done, or not done, in connection with this work; and if his father made a suggestion it was as likely as not to be overruled. He was only one of the senators in Johnny’s little curia, and probably far from the most important of them.

Johnny’s father got away, after all, before I did. Johnny asked me to stay for a little, and there was not much for a young professional man to do after catching the 4.52 into town. We sat for a while talking of indifferent matters. Johnny, surrounded by his own prosperity, asked with a show of interest, and without condescension, about my progress in the law, and I was replying with the cautious vagueness of one whose practice is not

## ON THE STAIRS

yet all he hopes it will be. During this time I had noticed, through the maze of gilt lettering, a limousine standing just round the corner. Its curtains were drawn: "an odd circumstance," I had commented inwardly. All of a sudden the street-door of the bank burst open, and three masked men, brandishing revolvers, rushed in.

"You cover the cashier!" cried one; "we'll take care of the vault!"

Johnny McComas flung open a drawer, seized a revolver of his own, sprang to his feet —

Pardon me, dear reader. The simple fact is, I have suddenly been struck by my lack of drama. You see how awkwardly I provide it, when I try. What bank robbers, I ask you, would undertake such an adventure at half-past four in the afternoon? I cannot compete with the films. As a matter of fact, the vault stood locked, the tellers were gone, even the office-boy had stolen away, and Johnny and I were left alone together, exchanging rather feebly, and with increasing feebleness, some faint and unimportant boyhood remin-

## ON THE STAIRS

iscences. . . . I feel abysmally abashed; let us open a new section.

### II

As I have said, Raymond wrote. He wrote, for example, with a voluminous duteousness, to his parents. His letters to them, so far as they came to my notice, were curious; probably he meant that they should be saved and should become a sort of journal of his travels. They were almost completely impersonal. There was plenty of straight description; but beyond some slight indications of his own movements, past or intended, there was no narration. He never mentioned people he met; he never described his adventures — if he had any. He seemed to be saying to Europe, as Rastignac said to Paris, “*À nous deux, maintenant!*” He was at grips with the Old World, and that sufficed.

His letters to me, however, were not devoid of personal reactions. These commonly took an æsthetic turn. An early letter from Rome had a good deal to say about the Baroque. He met it everywhere; it was an abomina-

## ON THE STAIRS

tion; it tried his soul. Fontana and Maderna, the Gog and Magog of architecture, had flanked the portals of art and had let through a hideous throng of artificialities and corruptions. . . . The word "Baroque" was new to me, and I looked it up. I learned that it described, not a current movement, as I had supposed, but an influence which had exhausted itself nearly three hundred years ago. But it was still recent and real to Raymond. And I learned, further, that this style had modern champions who could say a good word for it. In any event, it might be accepted calmly as a valuable and characteristic link in the general historic chain.

In another letter he was ecstatic over the Gothic brickwork of Cremona. It was so beautiful, he said in as many words, that it made his heart ache; not often did Raymond let himself go like that. Eager to follow his track — and to understand, if possible, his heart, however peculiar and baffling — I looked up, in turn, North Italian brickwork. This was twice three hundred years old. But it had stirred other modern hearts than Ray-



## ON THE STAIRS

mond's; for an English æsthete had tried (and almost succeeded) to impose it on his country as a living mode. "Very well," I said; "Italian brickwork may reasonably be accepted as a modern interest."

Raymond, before descending to Italy, had spent some months in Paris. Circumstances had enabled him to frequent a few studios, and his first letter to me from that city had been rather technical and "viewy." Incidentally, he had seen something of the students, and had found little to approve, either in their manners or their morals. He left Paris without reporting any moral infractions of his own and settled down for some stay in Florence. He was studying the language further, he reported: a language, he said, which was easy to begin, but hard to continue — the longer you studied the less you really knew. However, he knew enough for daily practical purposes. His *pension* was pleasant; small, and the few visitors were mostly English.

But there were one or two Americans in the house, and they came home a few months

## ON THE STAIRS

later with their account of Raymond and his ways. It was needed; for the three or four letters that he had printed in one of our newspapers contained little beyond descriptions of set sights — to think we should have continued to welcome that sort of thing so long! Well, these people reported him as conscientiously busy, for his hour each day, with grammar and dictionary. He was also getting his hand in painting; and he had “taken on” musical composition, even to instrumentation. “Too many irons!” commented my lively young informant. “And I think I should get my painting in Paris and my music in Germany.” She also said that Raymond had next to no social life—he showed hardly the slightest desire to make acquaintances.

“An old Frenchman came to the place for a few days,” she continued; “and as he was leaving he said your friend was living in an ivory tower — the windows few, the door narrow, and the key thrown away. ‘Ivory tower’ — do you understand what that means?”

“No,” I said. But of course I understand now.

## ON THE STAIRS

### III

As a consequence of my call at Johnny McComas's office (or as a probable consequence), I received, some six months later, an invitation to his wedding. You will expect to hear that I was present, and perhaps acted as usher, or even as best man. Nothing of the sort was the case, however; I was absent at the time in the East. Nor are you to imagine me as continually following, at close range, the vicissitudes, major and minor, which made up his life, or made up Raymond's. An exact, perpetual attendance of fifty years is completely out of the question. Don't expect it.

Johnny married, I was told, a young woman living in his own suburb, the daughter of a manufacturer of some means. I met him about two months after his great step. He was still full of the new life, and full of the new wife.

"She's fine!" he declared. "Not too fine, but fine enough for me."

He cocked his hat to one side.

## ON THE STAIRS

"Do you know, I talk to her just as I would to a man."

"Johnny!" I began, almost gasping.

"Well, what's wrong? Ever said anything much out of the way to you? Ever heard me say anything to any other fellow?"

"Why, no . . ." I was obliged to acknowledge.

"Then why the row? It's all easy as an old shoe. *She* likes it."

"I know. But — talking with a woman . . . It is n't quite like . . ."

"Don't make any mistake. Just have the big things right, and they'll overlook lots of the little ones."

"H'm," I said doubtfully. "I supposed it was just the other way. Lay a lot of stress on certain little things, and larger shortcomings won't bother them. Bring her a bunch of flowers to-day, and she'll help you deed away the house and lot to-morrow."

"Fudge!" said Johnny. "I mean the really big things. There's only two. Ground to stand on and air to breathe."

"That is to say . . .?"

## ON THE STAIRS

"A platform under her feet and an atmosphere about her. Well, she's got me to stand on and to surround her. She understands it. She likes it. Nothing else matters much."

"Ah!" said I.

"I'm her bedrock, and I'm her — How do they say it? I'm her — envelopment, as those painting fellows put it."

"See here, Johnny," I protested; "Don't get anachronistic. We are only in 1884. That expression won't reach America for ten or fifteen years. Have some regard for dates."

"It won't? Was n't it in your friend's letter?"

"What friend?"

"Why, Prince; when he was in Paris. Did n't you read it to me?"

I remembered.

"Do you know," he went on, "I've been straight as a string — ever since. And I'm going to keep so."

"I should hope so, indeed."

"Whatever I may have been before. But I think it's better for a young fellow to dash

## ON THE STAIRS

in and find out than to keep standing on the edge and just wonder."

"Well, I don't know, Johnny," I returned soberly. "I'm going to be married myself, next month. And I expect to go to my bride just as pure —"

"No preaching," said Johnny. "The slate's wiped clean. Adele's all right for me, and I'm all right to her."

He adjusted his hat, making the two sides of the brim level.

"We're going to move shortly," he stated. "The business can go on where it is, for a while, but we're going to live somewhere else."

Perhaps in the city itself, it appeared; perhaps in some suburb toward the north. But no longer in one to the west. Johnny was developing some such scent for social values and some such feeling for impending topographical changes as had begun to stir the great houses that were grouped about the Princes.

"So you're the next one?" he said presently. "It's the only life. Good luck to you. And who's going to see you through? Prince?"

## ON THE STAIRS

"Yes — 'my friend.' I'm glad you remember him."

"Oh yes; I can remember him when I try. But I don't try very hard or very often. Back in this country?"

"He is."

"What's he doing?" Johnny fixed his hard blue eyes firmly on me.

I was sorry to have no very definite answer. "He has been in the East lately. He'll be back here in time for me."

"Well," said Johnny darkly; and that was all.

## IV

Raymond's "tower" was not static, but peripatetic. Early in his second summer abroad it was standing among the Dutch windmills for a brief season; and when he learned that I was to have a short vacation in England — the only quarter of the Old World I ever cared for — he left it altogether for a fortnight and came across from Flushing to see me.

Two points immediately made themselves

## ON THE STAIRS

clear. Firstly, he was viewing the world through literature — through works of fiction in some cases, through guidebooks in more. Everything was a spectacle, with himself quite outside as an onlooker; and nothing was a spectacle until it had been ranged and appraised in print. Secondly, if he was outside of things, America was still farther outside; it existed as a remote province not yet drawn into the activities and interests of the “world.” He seemed willing, even anxious, to make himself secondary, subordinate. However he may have been on the Continent, here in England his desire to conform made him appear subservient and almost abject. My own unabashed and unconscious Americanism — the possible consequence of inexperience — sometimes embarrassed him, and he occasionally undertook to edit my dealings with members of the older half of our race, even with waiters and cabmen. As for the more boastful, aggressive, self-assertive sort of Americanism, *that* would make him tremble with anger and blush for shame.

I will say this in his behalf, however: he



## ON THE STAIRS

did not like England and was not at home there.

"The little differences," he observed, one day, "made more trouble than the big ones. A minor seventh is all right, while a minor second is distressing. I am happier among the Latins."

Yet I am sure that even among his Latins he took the purely objective view and valued their objects of interest according as they were starred and double-starred, or left unmarked in the comparative neglect of small print.

We saw together Canterbury and Cambridge and Brighton and a few other approved places. Through all these he walked with a meticulous circumspection, wondering what people thought, asking inwardly if he were squaring with their ideas of what conduct should be. Only once did I find him fully competent and sufficiently assertive. The incident occurred on a late afternoon, in a small side street just off the Strand, while I was casting about for one of those letter-pillars. Raymond was approached,

## ON THE STAIRS

as was proper to the locality and the time of day, by a young woman of thirty who had a hard, determined face and who was clothed on with a rustling black dress that jingled with jet. I was near enough to hear.

"Good-afternoon," she said.

"Good-afternoon."

"Where," with marked expressiveness, "are you going?"

"I'm going to stand right here."

"Give me a drink."

"Could n't think of it."

"Stand," she said, with sudden viciousness, "stand and rot!"

Raymond, after an instant's surprise, made a response in his unstudied vernacular. "Yes, *I'll* stand; but you skip. Shoo!"

She was preparing some retort, but he waved both his hands, wide out, as if starting a ruffled, vindictive hen across a highway. At the same time he caught sight of a constable on the corner, and let her see that he saw —

"Constable!" — why, I am as bad as Raymond himself: I mean, of course, policeman.

## ON THE STAIRS

But the London police are sometimes chary in the exercise of their functions. What really started the woman on her way was his next brief remark, accompanied by the hands, as before, though with a more decided shade of propulsion.

"Scoot!" She went, without words.

These were the only American observations I heard from Raymond during that fortnight.

I wish he had been as successful on the night of our arrival in London when we encountered, in the court behind the big gilded grille of the Grand Metropole, the porter of that grandiose establishment. We had come together from Harwich and did not reach this hotel until half an hour before midnight. We had had our things put on the pavement and had dismissed the cab, and the porter, with an airy, tentative insolence, now reported the place full.

"*I don't know who ordered your luggage down, sir; I did n't,*" he said with a smile that was an experiment in disrespect.

Raymond looked as if he were for imme-

## ON THE STAIRS

diately adjusting himself to this — though I could hardly imagine his ever having done the like in Paris or in Florence. He was quite willing to confess himself in the wrong: yes, he ought to have remembered that the “season” was beginning; he ought to have known that this particular season, though young, had set in with uncommon vigor; he ought to have known that all the hotels, even the largest, were likely to be crowded and have sent on a wire. The porter, emboldened by the departure of the cab, and by my companion’s contrite silence, began to embroider the theme.

Now a single week in England had taught me that no two men in that country — the home of political but not of social democracy — are likely to talk long on even terms. One man must almost necessarily take the upper hand and leave to the other the lower, and the relation must be reached early. I resolved on the upper — cab or no cab. I glared — as well and as coldly as I could. The fellow was only a year or so older than I.

“You are too chatty,” I said. “Fewer

## ON THE STAIRS

words and more action. If you are full, call somebody to take us and our baggage to some hotel near by that is not full."

The fellow sobered down and gave us his first look resembling respect.

"Very good, sir. I will, sir. Thank you, sir," — though he had nothing to thank me for, and though he well knew there was to be nothing.

Raymond looked at me as one looks at a friend who surprises by the sudden disclosure of some unexpected talent or power.

"But you said 'baggage,'" he commented.

"Indeed I did," said I.

## V

Our new hotel, we discovered next morning, was duplicated in name by another, four doors down the street. During the day we heard the reason for this. A domestic difficulty had overtaken husband and wife and the two had separated, each keeping an interest in the serviceable name and a frontage on the familiar street. We were in the husband's hotel, under the very discreet minis-

## ON THE STAIRS

trations of the young woman who had caused the break. "Do you quite like this?" Raymond had asked me. But he became reassured on seeing in the guest-book the names of two or three well-known and sufficiently respected compatriots. By the next day he was able to cast on Miss Brough, as she flitted (still discreetly) through her functions, the eye of a qualified idealization. I am sure he would never have viewed indulgently any such situation at home. But the poor, patient, cautious girl helped him toward realizing the sophistications and corruptions of European society, and so he welcomed her. But I believe he avoided speaking to her. She may have been hurt, or she may have been amused; or neither. Yet, after all, this *contretemps* was for him, I felt, but a prosaic substitute for something richer. A similar situation in Naples, say, taken at close range, might have quickened his interest considerably.

Next day there was something different for him to report. He had gone into a courtyard off Holborn, drawn by the sound of a

## ON THE STAIRS

hurdy-gurdy. Four or five little girls were dancing, and some older women stood looking on. For a few moments he looked on too, probably with an effect of aloof and amused patronage. But patronage was not for that court.

Presently one of the younger women, who wore a hat full of messy plumes and carried a small fish in each hand by the tail, stepped up and invited him to trip a measure with her. "Trip a measure" — it has a fine Elizabethan or Jacobean sound, whether she used the precise expression or not. But Raymond demurred; at first politely; later, perhaps not so politely. But he was whisked into the dance and made to take several turns. He was so embarrassed that he called it all an "adventure." Possibly it was meant for a lesson in manners.

Thus Raymond in England. As he said, he liked the Continent better. I hope he showed to better advantage there, and I should have liked to see him there — to be with him there. For he rather put a brake on any measure of exuberance and momen-

## ON THE STAIRS

tum which I might have brought to England with me, and I could only trust that his strait-jacket was partly unlaced among the French and Italians. I think that likely, for with them he was, of course, an acknowledged and unmistakable foreigner. But my fortnight with him was cramped and uncomfortable; and when we parted at the American Exchange — I for Liverpool and he for Calais — I confess I had a slight feeling of relief. I felt, too, that my conduct, however native and unstudied, had pleased the Island quite as well as his.

At the Exchange itself he never read American newspapers — least of all, one from his own town. I believe, too, he avoided them on the Continent. Living a very special life, he meant to keep himself integral, uncontaminate. And behind us both was the other world, his own, all vital and astir.

Yes, I am aware that my prose is pedestrian, and that Europe — as it once was, to us — deserves a brighter and higher note. I will attempt, just here, a purple patch.

Europe, then, — the beacon, hope, and



## ON THE STAIRS

cynosure of our fresh, ingenuous youth — the glamorous realm afar which drew to itself from across the sea our eager artist-bands, pilgrims to the Old, the Stately, and the Fair; Europe, which reared above our dull horizon the towers of Oxford and of Notre Dame, sent up into our pale, empty sky the shimmering mirage of Venice, and cast across our workaday way the grave and noble shadow of Rome; Europe, which gave out through the varying voices of Correggio, Canova, Hugo, and Wagner the cry, so lofty and so piercing-sweet, of Art; Europe, which with titles and insignia and social grandeurs, once dazzled and bemused our inexperienced senses . . . and so on.

Easy!

But worth while?

I shall not attempt to decide.

To-day Europe seems not all we once found it; and we, on the other hand, have come to be more than some of us at least once figured ourselves. We are beginning to have glammers and importances of our own.

## ON THE STAIRS

### VI

Raymond lingered on for a year or more in Italy, and came home, as I have implied, in time for my wedding. He found his native city more uncouth and unkempt than ever. Such it was, absolutely; and such it was, relatively, after his years under a more careful and self-respecting régime. The population was still advancing by leaps and bounds, and hopeful spirits had formed a One-Million Club. A few others, even more ardent, said that the population was already a million, or close upon it, and busied themselves to start a Two-Million Club. They had their eyes wide open to the advantage of numbers, and tightly closed to the palpable fact that the community was unable properly to house and administer the numbers it already had. The city seemed to cry: "I need a friendly monitor — one who will point me out the decencies and compel me to adopt them." The demagogue who had ruled and misruled before had been reelected once or twice, and the newspapers were still indulging their familiar

## ON THE STAIRS

strain of irresponsible and ineffective criticism. The dark world behind him had become more populous and bold, and the forces for good still seemed unable to organize and coöperate toward making betterment an actuality. But new people were always flocking in — people from the farms, villages and country-towns of the Middle region — and bringing with them the uncontaminated rustic ideals of rightness and decorum: a clean stream pouring into a turbid pool, and the time was to come when it would make itself felt. Meanwhile, the city remained — to Raymond — a gross, sharp village, one full of folk who, whether from the Middle West or from Middle Europe, had never come within ten leagues of gentility, and who, one and all, were absorbedly and unabashedly bent on the object which had suddenly assembled them at this one favored spot — the pushing of their individual fortunes. A hauptstadt-to-be, perhaps; but, so far, an immensely inchoate and repellent miscellany.

Raymond's father gave him a sober welcome. His mother attempted a brief, spas-

## ON THE STAIRS

modic display of affection; but it was too much, and only a maid and her pillows saw her for the next few days. His father seemed older, much older; tired, careworn, worried. The trouble of settling old Jehiel's estate had been all that could have been expected, and more. There were claims, complications, lawsuits, what not; and through all this maze James Prince had to put up with the inherited help of the dry, dismal old fellow whom I had seen in earlier days at the house. I had come, now, to a better professional knowledge of him. He was a man of probity, and of some ability, but a deliberate; impossible to hurry, and not easy, as it seemed, even to interest. Under him matters dragged dully through the courts, and others' nerves were worn to shreds. I remember how surprised I was one day on hearing that he had picked up enough resolution to die.

Raymond did not much concern himself about his father's burdens. He assumed, I suppose, that such taxes on a man's brain and general vitality were proper enough to middle age and to the business life of a large

## ON THE STAIRS

city. However, he was living — just as he had principally lived abroad — on his father's bounty. His contributions to the press — whether a daily, or, of late, a monthly — brought in no significant sums; and a bequest of some size from his grandfather was slow in finding its way into his hands.

As I have said, Raymond might have taken an advantageous position in home society. He made no effort, and I sometimes caught myself wondering if his attitude might be that there was "nobody here." He might have joined his father's club; but the older men principally played billiards and talked their business affairs between. However, he did not care for billiards, nor had their affairs any affinity with his. A younger set — noisy and assertive out of proportion to its numbers — gave him no consolation, still less anything like edification. They were *au premier plan*; they possessed no background; they were without atmosphere — without envelopment, as Johnny McComas might have amended it (though no such lack would have been noted or resented by Johnny himself). *Bref*, he

## ON THE STAIRS

knew what they all were without going to see. And as for "society," it rustled flimsily, like tissue-paper; bright, in a way, but still thin and crackling.

I wonder how he found such society as attended my wedding. I shall not describe it; I did not describe Johnny's — probably the more important event of the two for the purposes of this calm narrative. Yet, if you will permit me, I shall touch on two points.

I wish, first, to say that, in my ears and to my eyes, the name "Elsie" is just as dear and charming as it ever was. Perhaps, at one period of my courtship, I wondered if the name would wear. No name more delightful and suitable for a gay, arch, sweet young girl of twenty; but how, I asked myself, will the name sit on a woman of forty, or on one of sixty? Well, I will confess that, at forty, a certain strain of incongruity appeared; but it marvelously vanished during the following score of years, and the name now seems utterly right for the dainty figure and gentle face of my lifelong companion. And though

## ON THE STAIRS

our eldest daughter is unmarried and thirty-five, we have never regretted passing on this beautiful name to her.

My second point must deal with Raymond's attitude toward me on my wedding-day and on the days preceding it. He was stiff, constrained, dissatisfied — merely courteous toward my Elsie, and not at all cordial to me. I wondered whether he blamed me for thus bringing him back home; but the real reason, as I came to understand later, was quite different. He regarded the marriage of a friend as a personal deprivation, and the bride as the chief figure in the conspiracy. After my defection, or misappropriation, he solaced himself by trying to make one or two other friendships. When these friends married in turn, like process produced like results. These men, however, he threw overboard completely; in my case, he showed, after a while, some relenting, and ultimately even forgiveness. By the time he came to marry on his own account, the last of his very few bachelor friends had "gone off"; so there was no chance of inflicting on anybody that

## ON THE STAIRS

displeasure which others had several times inflicted on him.

He sent Elsie a suitable present, and stood beside me through the ceremony as graciously as he was able.

“I wish you both great joy,” he said firmly, at the end; and it was six weeks before we saw him in our little home.



## PART IV

### I

JOHNNY McCOMAS was still carrying on his business life and his home life in the suburb where he had married, when I came, finally, to make my first call on the domestic group of which he was the nub. Still in the future was the day when he was to move into town, and to have also a summer home on the North Shore, and to make some of his father-in-law's spare funds yield profitable results, and to arouse among wistful clerks and unsuccessful "operators" an admiring wonder as the youngest bank-president in the "Loop."

I looked in on him one evening in late November. I found a house too emphatically furnished and a wife too concerned about making an impression. I did not consider myself a young man of prime consequence and did not relish the expenditure of so much effort: after all, Johnny's standing, Johnny's

## ON THE STAIRS

wife, Johnny's domestic *entourage* were not before a judgment-bar. It was plain to see that for Mrs. John W. McComas complete social comfort had not yet been reached, and I wondered if the next move might not show it as farther away than ever.

Johnny himself was bluff and direct, and took things as a matter of course. Much had been done, but more remained to be done; meanwhile all was well and good. After a little, his wife was content to leave us alone together, and we drifted to Johnny's "den" — a word new at that time, and descriptive of the only feature of his home on which he laid the slightest self-conscious emphasis.

I had heard that there were twins — boys; and soon, as the evening was still young, I heard the twins themselves. They had reached the age of ten months, and consequently had developed wants, but no articulate means for making those wants known. Therefore they howled, and they began howling in unison now. Perhaps it was for them that a foresighted mother had left us alone together.

## ON THE STAIRS

"Great little hollerers!" said Johnny placidly, pulling at his pipe.

I was still a bachelor. "Might shut the door?" I proposed.

"If you like," said Johnny, without enthusiasm. "They wake me every morning at five," he added.

Yes, I was still a bachelor — and probably a tactless, even a brutal, one.

"Might move them to another bedroom, farther away?" I suggested. The house seemed big enough for such an arrangement.

"Don't want to," declared Johnny. He began pulling at his pipe again, and there was a little silence during which I might meditate on the curt nobility of his remark.

The fact was, of course, that Johnny loved life; he embraced it with gusto, with both arms outspread. No sidestepping its advances; no dodging its sharp angles; no feeble mitigating of a situation for which he was himself responsible; no paltry deadening of domestic uproar merely because he himself happened to be within the domestic environment. "If Adele stands it, I will too —

## ON THE STAIRS

they're mine as well as hers," — such I conceive to have been his attitude. Johnny had no nerves, and only a minimum of sensibility. The sound-waves broke on his sensorium as ripples break on a granite coast. Perhaps they pleased him; perhaps they even soothed him. Why, bless you! these children were *his*! They were facts as great and as unescapable as the ebb and flow of the tides, as dawn and twilight, as the morning and evening stars. And the evening stars were singing together. Great may have been the jubilation for Johnny's ears, boundless the content in Johnny's heart.

I really think that Johnny felt through the din some of the exhilaration that often came to him with a good brisk scrap in his office — or in the other man's office. In fact, home and business were Johnny's two sources of interest and pleasure — the warp and woof of his life — and he was determined on getting the utmost out of each. His interest in his home circle may somewhat have declined — or at least have moderated — with advancing years, but it was incandescent now. His interest in

## ON THE STAIRS

the outside world — that oyster-bin awaiting his knife — never slackened, not even when the futility of piling up the empty shells became daylight-clear, and when higher things strove perseveringly, even unmistakably, to beckon him on. Never, in fact, throughout his life did he exhibit more than two essential concerns: one for his family and clan; and one for the great outside mass of mediocre individuals through whose ineptitudes he justly expected to profit.

Well, the door of the den remained open, and our talk went on to the rising and falling of infant voices. At last, thinking that my good-bye must be to Johnny only, I rose to go. You might reasonably ask for a clearer impression of his home and a more definite account of his wife. But what can I say when the primary address was so disconcertingly to the ear? Of his wife — who came down, during a lull, at the last moment — I can only say that she seemed too *empressee* at the beginning and too casual at the end. Perhaps she had decided that, after all, I was no more than I myself claimed to be. Perhaps the

## ON THE STAIRS

infant hurricane was still ruffling the surface of her mind, or even disturbing its depths.

"I won't ask you to call again," she said, as we shook hands for a good-night: "we shall be moving in the spring." She spoke with a satisfied air of self-recognized *finesse*, and as in the confident hope of completing very promptly some well-planned little programme; but —

"Visit us there," said Johnny, with a quick cordiality which prevented his wife from redeeming herself.

"There" had been the chief topic in the den. Many neighborhoods had been brought forward, with their attendant advantages and disadvantages. Johnny told me what he thought, and let me say what I thought. When I listened, it was as a man who might soon have a similar problem to consider. When I spoke it was to utter banalities sedately; any neighborhood might do, I said, that had good air; yes, and good schools — looking toward the future. And any house, I felt, would serve, if it had a nursery that was sealed, sound proof, remote . . .

## ON THE STAIRS

“Well, best luck in your search for your roof-tree,” I said earnestly to them both.

“‘Roof-tree’!” echoed Johnny. And, in fact, my observation did seem rather artificial and insincere.

### II

By the time Raymond reached home, Johnny McComas had turned his informal suburban enterprise into a “state” bank, with his father-in-law as president and himself as cashier. The father-in-law lent his name and furnished most of the capital; Johnny himself provided the driving power. And by the time Raymond had become, through his father’s death, the head of the family and the controller of the family funds, Johnny had turned his state bank into a national bank, with its offices in the city and with himself as president; and he had bought — at a bargain — a satisfactory house on the edge of the neighborhood where we first met him. The street was marked for business advance more promptly and more unmistakably than the precise quarter

## ON THE STAIRS

of the Princes. It would do as a home for a few years. The transaction appealed both to McComas's thrift and his pride. The coming of his new little bank, with its modest capital, made no particular stir in the "street"; and the great group of houses to the eastward were so apprehensive of open outrage, in one form or another, that his approach, in a guise still social, provoked but scant concern.

James Prince died when Raymond was about thirty. A careful, plodding man who had never brought any direct difficulties upon himself, but who had been worried — and worried out — through troubles left him by others. On the whole, he had found life an unrewarding thing; and he passed along, at fifty-five, with no great regrets. The tangle of family affairs had finally been straightened out in considerable measure, though Raymond found enough detail still left to make him realize what a five years his father had passed through; and when, the year following, his mother died, with the settlement of her estate almost overlapping the settlement



## ON THE STAIRS

of his father's, he acquired a new sense of the grinding, taxing possibilities of business. I speak from his own viewpoint; he was susceptible — unduly, abnormally so — to the grind and the tax. After a few months of clammy old Brand and his methods, he suddenly cut loose from him (without waiting for him to die, as he did a little later); and he told me that I was the man to wind up these tedious affairs. They were not nearly so difficult and complicated as they seemed to him — they were now largely routine matters, in fact; and I hope I carried things along at a tempo which satisfied him. This is not to deny that Raymond seemed to have days when he found even me dilatory and exasperating; but old Brand would probably have driven him mad.

Well, the prospects of his estate were not too brilliant. The lawsuits had been expensive and sometimes unsuccessful; the bank had passed a dividend, and the old houses, which had meant a lot of money in their day, meant less now and even loss in a near future. The time was fast coming when this

## ON THE STAIRS

circumscribed and unprotected neighborhood was to admit other — and prejudicial — interests: boarding-houses, of course; and refined homes for inebriates; and correspondence-schools for engineers; and one of the Prince houses became eventually the seat of a publishing-firm which needed a little distinction more than it needed a wide spread of glass close to the sidewalk.

Whatever the state of Raymond's fortunes, it was easy to see that they were not likely to improve in his hands. He detested business, both *en gros* and *en détail*. Despite his ancestry, he seemed to have been born with no faculty for money-making, and he never tried to make up his deficiency. It was all of a piece with the stone-throwing of his boyhood days — he never attempted to improve himself: it was enough to follow the gifts with which he had been natively endowed. Precept, example, opportunity — all these went for naught. To the end of his days he viewed the American "business man" as a portentous and inexplicable phenomenon — one to be regarded with dis-

## ON THE STAIRS

taste and wonder. He persisted in thinking of the type as a juvenile one — an energetic and clever boy, who was immensely active and immensely productive of results (in an immensely limited field), but who was incapable of anything like an *aperçu* or a *Weltanschauung* (oh, he had plenty of words for it!), and who was essentially booked to lose much more than he gained. He disliked “offices” and abominated “hours.” I think that even my own modest professional applications sometimes became a puzzle to him. . . .

And here I stand — convicted of having perpetrated another section without one short paragraph and without a single line of conversation. Let me hasten to bring Raymond to my suite and my desk-side, and make him speak.

He came down one morning, as administrator of his mother’s estate, to consider the appraisal of the personal property — many familiar items, and some discouraging ones.

“Do you *have* to do this?” he asked me, with the paper in his hand. “Do you *like* to do it?”

## ON THE STAIRS

"The world's work," I rejoined temperately. "It's got to be done."

"H'm!" he returned. "The world's a varied place. And its work is varied too. This blessed town must be taught that."

Was he girding himself to be one of its teachers?

From that time on I resolved to take him patiently and good-humoredly: a friend must bear a friend's infirmities.

### III

I did not know, with precision, what phases of the world's work were engaging Raymond's attention. I suppose he was adventuring, rather vaguely, among the "liberal arts," though he probably saw, by this time, that a full professional exercise of any of them was beyond his reach. He was heard of as writing short essays and reviews for one or two genteel publications, as making water-color tours through the none too alluring suburbs, as composing minor pieces for a little musical society which he had joined and which he wished

## ON THE STAIRS

to advance, and so on. Acquaintances reported him at architectural exhibits and at book-auctions — occasions neither numerous nor important. He lived on alone in his father's house — expensively; too expensively, of course, for it was an exacting place to keep up.

He was coming to be known in a small circle — but an influential one — as a young man of wealth, culture, and good-will. But his wealth was less than supposed, his culture was self-centred, and his good-will was neither broad nor zealous.

However, the new day was coming when he could be turned to account — or when, at least, people made the attempt.

This, however, does not mean philanthropy. That was barely dawning as a social necessity. The few who were supporting charitable institutions and were working in the recently evolved slums were neither conspicuous nor fashionable. Nor does it mean political betterment. No efforts had yet been successful in substituting for the city's executive incubus a man of worthier type, nor

## ON THE STAIRS

was there yet any effective organization founded on the assumption — which would have seemed remote and fantastic indeed — that a city council could be improved. Parlor lectures on civics were of course still farther in the future. Poor government was simply a permanent disability, like weather, or lameness, or the fashions; folk must get along as best they could in spite of it. The town remained a chaos of maladministration and of non-administration; but when the decencies are, for the time being, despaired of, one may still try for the luxuries. So the city girded itself for a great festival; the nation approved and coöperated, and a vast congeries of white palaces began to rise on our far edge.

The detailed execution of this immense undertaking was largely local, of course. Though the work was initiated by older heads (some of them were too old and were dropped), there were places on the innumerable committees for younger ones — for men in their early thirties; their vigor, enthusiasm, and even initiative (within under-

## ON THE STAIRS

stood limits) would greatly further the cause. There were (among others) committees on entertainment to engage the services of young men of position, leisure, and social experience. There were many foreign dignitaries to be received and guided; there must be lively and presentable youths to help manœuvre them. Raymond, who was supposed to have mingled in European society (instead of having viewed it from afar, in detachment), was asked to serve in this field.

There were equally good opportunities for brisk, aggressive young men on finance committees and such-like bodies, wherein prominent sexagenarians did the heavily ornamental and allowed good scope for younger men who had begun to get a record and who wished to confirm ability in influential eyes. This opened a road for John W. McComas, who made a record, indeed, in the matter of gathering local subscriptions. He dented the consciousness of several important men in his own field, and got praised in the press for his indefatigability and his powers of persuasion. Before the six months of fes-

## ON THE STAIRS

tivity were half over, our Johnny had become a "prominent citizen" and his new bank almost a household word.

Raymond did less well. The great organization was an executive hierarchy: ranks and rows of officials, with due heed not only to coördination but to subordination. Some men do their best under such conditions; others, their worst. Raymond, a strong individualist, a pronounced egoist, could not "fall in." Even in his simple field — one concerned chiefly with but the outward flourishes — the big machine irked and embarrassed him. He withdrew. When an imperial prince was publicly "received," with ceremonies that mingled old-world formalities (however lamely followed) and local inspirations (however poorly disciplined), the moving event went off with no help of his: I believe he even smiled at it all from a balcony.

It was here that Raymond began to make clear his true type. He was Goethe's "bad citizen" — the man who is unable to command and unwilling to obey.



## ON THE STAIRS

After a particularly flamboyant appreciation of McComas's services in a Sunday newspaper, I ventured to touch on our Johnny's rise in Raymond's hearing. The two had not met for years; and Johnny had probably no greater place in Raymond's mind than Raymond, as I remembered once finding, had in Johnny's. But Raymond did not yet pretend to overlook or to forget or to ignore him; nor did he yet allow himself to mention Johnny as a one-time dweller in his father's stable.

"Why, yes," said Raymond; "he seems to be coming on fast. Climbing like anything."

This, I felt, was disapproval, slightly tinted with contempt. But there are two kinds of progress on a ladder or a stairway. There is the climbing up, and there is (as we sometimes let ourselves say) the climbing down.

It was at the imperial reception that Raymond and Johnny finally met. Let us figure Raymond as descending from his satirical balcony, and Johnny, with his wife, as earnestly working his way up the great stairway

## ON THE STAIRS

— the *scalone*, as Italy had taught Raymond to call it. This was an ample affair with an elaborate handrail, whose function was nullified by potted plants, and with a commodious landing, whose corners contained many thickset palms. A crowd swarmed up; a crowd swarmed down; the hundreds were congested among the palms. Johnny, with his wife on his arm, was robust and hearty, and smiled on things in general as he fought their way up. He took the occasion as he took any other occasion: much for granted, but with a certain air of richly belonging and of worthily fitting in. His wife — “I suppose it was his wife,” said Raymond — was elaborately gowned and in high feather: a successful delegate of luxury. Obviously an occasion of this sort was precisely what she had long been waiting for. Despite the press about her, she made her costume and her carriage tell for all they might. A triumphing couple, even Raymond was obliged to concede. The acme of team work . . .

“There we were — stuck in the crowd,” said Raymond, whose one desire seemed to

## ON THE STAIRS

have been to gain the street. "Not too close, fortunately. I had to bow, but I did n't have to speak; and I did n't have to be 'presented.' He gave me quite a nod."

And no great exercise of imagination was required for me to see how distant and reserved was Raymond's bow in return.

### IV

That autumn, after the festal flags had ceased their flaunting and fire had made a wide sweep over the white palaces, Raymond suddenly went abroad. It was to be a stay of three or four months. He first wrote me from Paris.

He wrote again in December, also from Paris, and told me *tout court* that he was engaged to be married. I give this news to you as suddenly as he gave it to me.

You can supply motives as easily as I. His parents were gone and his family life was *nil*. The old house was large and lonely. You may believe him influenced, if you like, by his last view of Johnny McComas and by Johnny's amazing effect of completeness

## ON THE STAIRS

and content. You may fancy him as visited by compunctions and mortifications due to his consciousness of his own futility. Or you may fall back upon the simple and general promptings that are smoothly current in the minds of us all. My own notion, however, is this: he never would have married at home; only an insidious whiff of romance, encountered in France or Italy, could have accomplished his undoing.

Raymond's own advices were meagre. "Your emotional participation not particularly desired" — such seemed to be the message that lay invisible between his few lines. But other correspondents supplied the *lacunæ*. He was to marry a girl whose family formed part of the American colony in the French capital. At least, the feminine members of the family were there: the mother, and an elder sister. The father, according to a custom that still provoked Gallic comment, was elsewhere: he was following the markets in America. The bride-to-be was between nineteen and twenty. Raymond himself was thirty-three.

## ON THE STAIRS

He advised me, later, that the wedding would take place at the end of February and requested me to obtain and forward some of the quaint documents demanded at such a juncture by the French authorities. He added that he hoped for a honeymoon in Italy, but that his fiancée favored Biarritz and Pau.

The wedding came off at one of the American churches in Paris. It was a sumptuous ceremonial, aided by a bishop (who was on his travels, but who had not forgotten to bring along his vestments) and by the attendance of half the colony. Raymond was obliged to put up with all this pomp and show, much as it ran counter to his tastes and inclinations. But fortunately he was made even less of than most young men on such an occasion; he had few connections on either side of the water, so the bride's connections dominated the day and made her the chief figure still more completely than is commonly the case. And the honeymoon was spent, not in the north of Italy, but in the south of France.

## ON THE STAIRS

There are times when a young girl must have her way. And there are times when a young husband (but not so young) will determine to have his. I knew Raymond.

The couple were in no haste to get home. The four months ran to almost a year. I first met the new wife at a reception in the early autumn.

"Gertrude," said Raymond, "let me present to you my old friend —" H'm! let me see: what *is* my name? — Oh, yes: "Gertrude, let me present to you my old friend, George Waite."

Can a young bride, dressed in black, and dressed rather simply too, look almost wicked? Well, this one contrived to.

The effect was not due to her face, which had an expression of naïve sophistication, or of sophisticated naïveté, not at all likely to mislead the mature; nor to her carriage, which, though slightly self-conscious, was modest enough, and not a bit too demure. It was due to her dress, which, after all, was not quite so simple, either in intention or in execution, as it seemed. It was black, and

## ON THE STAIRS

black only; and it was trimmed with black jet or spangles or passementerie or whatever — let some one else find the name. It was cut close, and it was cut low; too close and too low — she was the young married woman with a vengeance. It took a tone and bespoke a tradition to which most of us were as yet strangers, and our initiation into a new and equivocal realm had been too sudden for our powers of adjustment. It was Paris in its essence — the thing in itself — and it had all come unedited through the hands of a mother and a sister who were so rapt or so subservient as to be incapable of offering opposition to the full pungency of the Parisian evangel, and of hushing down an emphatic text for acceptance in a more quiet environment. I can only say that several nice young chaps looked once and then looked away. Raymond himself was inconvenienced. Nor did matters mend when, within a week or so, Mrs. Raymond Prince began to rate the women of her new circle as “homespun.”

Her little hand fell most heavily on these

## ON THE STAIRS

poor aborigines when two or three members of Raymond's singing-class loyally came to one of her own receptions. These Adeles and Gertrudes of the earlier day were now wives and mothers, with the interests proper to such. They had shepherded babies through croup and diphtheria, and were now seeing husky, wholesome boys and girls of twelve and thirteen through the primary schools. When among themselves, they talked of servants and husbands. They had not married and gone West or East; they had married at home, and they had stayed at home. They had had too many things on their hands and minds to catch up much of the recent exoticism stirring about them here in town, and they were far from able to cope with this recent importation of exoticism from the Rue de la Paix.

Raymond came home, one afternoon, in time for the last half-hour of his wife's last reception. Her dress, on this occasion, was quite as daring, in its way, as on the other, and original to the point of the bizarre. One of the early Adeles was leaving, but she



## ON THE STAIRS

stopped for a moment and attempted speech. She was the particular Adele with the piercing soprano voice — a voice which had since lowered itself to sing lullabies to three successive infants.

“Well, Raymond —” she began hopefully, and stopped. She tried again, but failed; and she passed on and out with her words unsaid.

“Well, Raymond —” Yes, I am afraid that that was the impression of more early friends than one.

### V

Raymond had expected, of course, to give his wife her own way at the beginning — at the very beginning, that is; and he had expected, equally, to have her make a definite impression on the circle awaiting her. But —

Well, he had intended to “take her in hand,” and to do it soon. She was to be formed, or re-formed; she was to be adjusted, both to things in general and to himself especially. Besides being her husband, he was

## ON THE STAIRS

to be her kindly elder brother, her monitor, patient but firm; she was to enter upon a state of tutelage. He was pretty certain to be right in all his views, opinions and practices; and she, if her views, opinions and practices were at variance with his, was pretty certain to be in the wrong. He assumed that, during those few years in Paris, she had learned it all in one big lesson only. The time had been too short to confirm all this sudden instruction into a reasoned and assimilated way of life; by no means had that superficial miscellany been rubbed into the warp and woof of her being. The Parisian top-dressing would be removed and the essential subsoil be exposed and tilled. . . .

H'm!

One of the strongest of her early impressions was naturally that of the house in which she was to live. It was big and roomy; it was detached, and thus open to light and air. But its elephantine woodwork repelled her, for she had grown up amid the rococo exuberances of Paris apartments. The heavy honesty of black-walnut depressed her after

## ON THE STAIRS

the gilded stucco of her mother's salon. And that huge, portentous orchestrion took up such an immensity of room!

I doubt if the neighborhood itself pleased her much better, though it was homogeneous (in its way), and dignified, and enjoyed an exceptional measure of quietude. Perhaps it was too quiet, after some years of a balcony on a boulevard. And it is true that some of the big houses were vacant, and that some of the families roundabout went away too often and stayed away too long. An empty house is a dead house, and when doors and windows are boarded up you may say the dead house is laid out. Things were sometimes *triste* — the French for final condemnation. The exodus so long foreshadowed seemed appreciably under way. This Gertrude became increasingly conscious, as the months went on, that most of the people she wanted to see and most of the houses she was prompted to frequent were miles away, and that the flood-tide of business rolled between.

Of her reaction to the circle in which she

## ON THE STAIRS

first found herself I have given you one or two indications. It would be easy, as it would be customary, to give some other of her early social experiences in detail and her reactions to them; but my interest is frankly in her husband and in his reactions. It was of him, too, that I saw the most; and I have never gone greatly into society.

At the end of a long and possibly somewhat dull winter his wife began to hint the advantageousness of transferring themselves to that other part of town. Raymond was not precisely in the position where he cared to pay high rent for a small house, while a big house was standing empty and unrealizable. Pouts; frowns . . . But nature came to his aid. With a new young life soon to appear above the horizon, now was no time to shift. His son should be born in the house in which he ought to be born. A reasonable view, on the whole; and it prevailed.

Raymond had said "son," and son it was. The baby was not named Raymond: his father, however much of an egoist, was not

## ON THE STAIRS

willing to put himself forward as such so obviously, nor for a period that promised to be indefinitely long. Nor was the baby called Bartholomew, after his maternal grandfather in the East: for who cared to inflict such an old-fashioned, four-syllable name on such a small morsel of flesh? He entered the battle under the neutral and not over-colorful pennon of Albert: his mother could thus call him "Bertie," and think, not too remotely, of her parent on the stock exchange.

Raymond was not long in discovering, after reaching home, what sacrifices the new life was to involve. On the Continent, in the midst of change and stir, these had not foretold themselves. Back in his own house, his interests — "intellectual interests" he called them — began to assert themselves in the old way. But he was no longer free to range the fields of the mind and take shots at the arts as they rose. Least of all was he to read in the evening. That was to neglect, to affront. However, the arrival of little Albert — poor tad! — changed the current of his wife's own interests and helped to place

## ON THE STAIRS

one more rather vital matter in abeyance. He was to live — for a while, anyway — in his present home; and he was to pursue — for a while, anyway — some of the accustomed interests of his bachelor days. He expected that, before long, his wife would accept his environment and the practices he had always followed within it. She needed enlightenment on many points. He had already communicated some of his views on dress, for example; and he had readjusted her notions on the preparation of salads. He gave her, pretty constantly, corrective glances through, or over, his eyeglasses, — for his sight had begun to weaken early, as his father had foreseen, — and he meant that such glances should count. She required to be edited; well, the new manuscript was worth his pains, and would be highly creditable in its revised version.

### VI

If one advantage showed forth from a situation that seemed, in general, not altogether promising, it was this: Raymond,

## ON THE STAIRS

hearing his native town commented upon unfavorably by his wife, — who was keen and constant in her criticisms, — began to defend it. It was one thing for the native-born to pick flaws; it was another when that ungracious work was attempted by a newcomer. And he meant not only to defend it, but to remain in it, though his wife had married him partly on the strength of his European predilections, and largely on the assumption that a good part of their married life would be spent abroad. He even began to wonder if he might not join in and help improve things. Like most of his fellow-townsmen, he regarded the city's participation in the late national festival as a great step in advance, — the first of many like steps soon to follow. The day after the Fair was late; but better to be late than never. Really, there was hope for the Big Black Botch. More and more he felt inclined to lessen still further its lessening enormity. After all, this town was the town of his birth: and a fundamental egoism cried out that it should be more worthy of him. He recalled a group of Amer-

## ON THE STAIRS

ican women — Easterners — whom, during his first trip abroad, he had caught poring over the guest-book of a hotel in Sorrento. He was the last male arrival in a slow season; he seemed interesting and promising; evidently they had had hopes. “But,” asked one of them, “how is it you are willing to register openly from such a town as that?” — and Raymond had felt the sting. “Such nerve, such bumptiousness!” he said to me in recalling that query some years later. But he did not add that he had tried to deliver any *riposte*. Instead he was now to make a belated return at home, where effort most counted. The years immediately to come were to be full of new openings and opportunities; in his own way, and under his peculiar handicaps, he was to try to take some advantage of them.



## PART V

### I

LITTLE ALBERT's babyhood kept his mother a good deal at home — and by "home" I mean the house in which he had been born. His father's lessened interest in Europe (and his diminished deference for it) kept his mother at home completely — and by "home" I now mean the town in which Albert had been born. Father, mother, and offspring filled the big house as well as they could — the big, *old* house as it was sometimes called by those who cherished a chronology that was purely American; and Albert was more than a year and a half along in life before his grandmother came across to see him and to inspect the distant *ménage*. She brought her water-waves and her sharpened critical sense, and went back leaving the impression that she was artificial and exacting.

## ON THE STAIRS

"She missed her Paris," said Raymond, "and her drive in the Bois."

"H'm!" said I, recalling that the town's recent chief executive had pronounced us, not many years back, the equal of Paris in civic beauty.

"We have no Bois, as yet," he added, thoughtfully. "Do you think we ever shall have one?"

He was revolving the Bois, not as a definite tract of park land, but as a social institution.

"I think," said I, "that we had better be satisfied with developing according to our own nature and needs."

"Yes," he returned; "there was the Frenchman at the fox-hunt: 'No band, no promenade, no nossing.' Well, we must go on our own tack, as soon as we discover it."

It need not be imagined that his mother-in-law's look-in of a month made his wife more contented. She kept on wishing for her new friends in another quarter, and (more strongly) for the familiar scenes of the other side. Raymond did not wish the expense involved in either move. His affairs were

## ON THE STAIRS

now going but tolerably. So far as the bank was concerned — a bank that had once been almost a “family” institution — his influence was naught. He was only a stockholder, and a smaller stockholder than once. His interest, in any sense, was but a brief, periodical interest in dividends. These were coming with a commendable regularity still. His rentals came in fairly too; but most of them were now derived from properties on the edge of the business district — properties with no special future and likely only to hold their own however favorable general conditions might continue. Travel? No. A man travels best in his youth, when he is foot-free, care-free, fancy-free. Go traveling too late, or once too often, and there is a difference. The final checking-off of something one has “always meant to see” may result in the most ashen disappointment of all: even intuition, without the pains of actual experience, should suffice to warn. Besides, as Raymond said, —

“We’ve both had a good deal of it. Let’s stay at home.”

## ON THE STAIRS

His wife cast about her. There is a mood in which a deprivation of high comedy may drive one to low-down farce. To-day people are even going farther. A worthy stage is dead, they say; and they patronize, somewhat willfully and contemptuously (or with a loose, slack tolerance that is worse), the moving pictures. Perhaps it was in some such mood that Raymond's wife took up with Mrs. Johnny McComas. They were but three streets apart. Mrs. McComas was lively, energetic, determined to drive on; and her ability to assimilate rapidly and light-handedly her growing opulence made it seem by no means a mere vulgar external adornment. She knew how to move among the remarkable furnishings with which she had surrounded herself in that old-new house, and how to make the momentum gained there serve her ends in the world outside.

"It will be a short life here," her husband had told her on their taking possession; "then, a quick sale — at a good figure — to some manufacturing concern, and on we go."

"If it's to be short, let's make it merry,"

## ON THE STAIRS

she had rejoined; and nothing had been spared that could give liveliness to their stately old interiors, while those interiors lasted.

Mrs. Raymond Prince vaguely pronounced their house "amusing." It had, like Adele McComas herself, a provocative dash which fell in with her present mood, and it pleased her that its *châtelaine* was inclined to dress up to its wayward sofas and hangings. She even went with Mrs. Johnny on shopping tours and abetted her as her fancies, desires and expenditures ran riot. It was a mood of irresponsibility — almost of defiant irresponsibility.

Now was the nascent day of the country club. Several of these welcome institutions had lately set themselves up in a modest, tentative way. Acceptance was complete, and all they had to do was to grow. With one of these McComas cast his lot. At the start it was a simple enough affair; but Johnny must have sensed its potentialities and savored its affinities, its coming congruity with himself. It was to become, shortly, a club for

## ON THE STAIRS

the suddenly, violently rich, the flushed with dollars, the congested with prosperity — for newcomers who had met Success and beaten her at her own game. Stir on all hands, the reek of sudden felicity in the air. In later years people with access to better things of similar sort were known to become indignant when asked to associate themselves with it. “Why should *I* want to join *that*?” was the question they put. But it pleased Johnny McComas, both by its present manifestations and its latent possibilities. It was richly in unison with his own nature, and I believe he had a ravishing vision of its magnificent futurities.

Last year my wife and I were taken to a Sunday afternoon concert out there. We found a place of towers and arcades, of endless corridors planted with columns and numberless chairs in numberless varieties, of fountained courts, of ball-rooms, of concert-halls, of gay apparel and cool drinks. We heard of fairs, horse-shows, tournaments in golf and tennis. The restaurant, with its acre of tables, glassed and naperied; the ranges of

## ON THE STAIRS

telephone booths, all going it together; the cellars, a vast subterrene, with dusky avenues of lockers, each cluttered with beverages of individual predilection — though I suppose that, after all, they were a good deal alike . . .

Well, it was too much for us; and my Elsie, who is essentially the lady, if woman ever was, came away feeling a little dowdy and a good deal out of date.

At that earlier period, however, it was still simple; the germ was there, but the development of its possibilities had only begun. When Mrs. McComas invited Mrs. Prince to drive out with her and see some tennis, Mrs. Prince was quite ready to accept.

I do not know just what mode of locomotion they employed. It was in the early days of the automobile and Johnny McComas was one of the first men in town to have one. I recall, in fact, some of his initial experiences with it. On a Sunday afternoon I encountered him in one of these still relatively unstudied contraptions on a frequented driveway. Another man was sitting beside him patiently. The conveyance was making no progress at

## ON THE STAIRS

all. Fortunately it had stopped close enough to the curb not to interfere with the progress of other and more familiar equipages.

"We're stuck," said Johnny, jovially, as he caught sight of me. "Ran for three or four miles slick as a whistle — and look at us now!" It entertained him — a kink in a new toy. And he enjoyed the interest of the people collected about.

"You're gummed up, I expect," said I. In those days nobody knew much about the new creature and its habits, and one man's guess was as good as another's. Two or three bystanders eyed me deferentially, as a probable expert.

"Likely enough," he agreed — and that made me an expert beyond doubt. "But this will do for to-day. We've been here twenty minutes."

He had the car pushed to a near-by stable, amidst the mixed emotions of the little crowd, and next day he had it hauled home.

"You were right," he said, when I met him out again in it, a week later. "*It was* gummed up, so to speak; but it's working like a charm



## ON THE STAIRS

to-day. Get in and I'll take you a few miles. That other fellow got an awful grouch."

It may have been by this machine, or by some more familiar mode of locomotion, that the two women reached the country club and its tennis tournament. Gertrude Prince strolled through its grounds and galleries with the aloof and amused air of one touring through a foreign town — a town never seen before and likely to be left behind altogether within an hour or two. It was at once semi-smart and semi-simple. She took it lightly, even condescendingly; and when Johnny McComas himself appeared somewhat later and set them down at a little marble table near a fountain-jet and offered cocktails as a preliminary to a variety of sandwiches, she decided, after looking about and seeing a few other ladies with glasses before them on other little marble tables, to accept. It was a lark in some town of the provinces — Meaux or Melun; what difference did it make?

They formed a little group altogether to Johnny's liking. His wife was dressed dashingly; his wife's guest made a very fair second;

## ON THE STAIRS

he himself, although he never lifted a racquet, was in the tennis garb of that day.

"You both look ripping," he declared with hearty satisfaction. To look thus, before competing items in the throng, was the object of the place, the reason for its developing *mise en scène*.

Johnny himself looked ripping — cool, confident, content, and at the top of his days.

"It was amusing . . ." said Gertrude to me, with an upward inflection, a week later.

And she asked me for more about Johnny McComas.

## II

If those were days when people began to combine for the pursuit of pleasure, they were also days when people began to gather at the call of public duty. If clubs were forming on the borders, other clubs, leagues, societies were forming nearer the centre — organizations to make effective the scattered good-will of the well-disposed and to gain some betterment in the local political life. To initiate and conduct such movements only a few were

## ON THE STAIRS

needed; but the many were expected to contribute, if not their zeal and their time, at least their dollars. It was patriotic righteousness made easy: a man had only to give his fifty dollars or his five hundred to feel, without further personal exertion, that he was a good citizen and was forwarding, as all good citizens should, a worthy cause. This way of doing it fell in wonderfully well with Raymond's temperament and abilities (or lack of them): the liberality of his contributions did not remain unknown, and he was sometimes held up as a favorable specimen of the American citizen.

Another movement was soon to engage his attention. If the prosperous were to have their playgrounds beyond the city's outskirts, the less prosperous should have theirs within the city's limits. The scheme of a system of small parks and playgrounds quite took Raymond's fancy. It contained, besides the idea of social amelioration, the even more grateful idea of municipal beautification. In time, indeed, might not this same notion, fortified by experience and given a wider

## ON THE STAIRS

application, end by redeeming the town not merely in spots but in its entirety? — a saved and graced whole, not only as to its heart, but as to its liberal and varied borders of water, woodland and prairie.

“I should be proud of that,” said Raymond heartily. The name of such a city, following one’s own name on any hotel-register, would indeed be a matter for pride.

He attended several of the early meetings that were designed to get some such project, in its simpler form, under way. He had friends among professional men in the arts, and some acquaintances among newly formed bodies of social workers. He was not slow in perceiving that the way was likely to be tedious and hard. It called for organization — the organization of hope, of patience, of hot, untiring zeal, of *finesse* against political chicanery, of persistence in the face of indifference and selfishness. “It will take years of organized endeavor,” he confessed. He recognized his own ineffectiveness beyond the narrow pale of hopeful suggestion, and wished that here too the giving of a substantial sum

## ON THE STAIRS

— a large penny-in-the-slot — might produce quick and facile results.

His wife, it is to be feared, looked upon these activities of his, however slight, with a lack-lustre eye. She knew nothing of local problems and local needs. She was conscious of a hortatory manner in small matters and of indifference, which she almost made neglect, in matters that appeared to her to be larger. If she asked for a fairer share in his evenings — he belonged to a literary club, a musical society, and so on — it was scant consolation to be told that he objected to some of her own activities and associations. He did not much care, for example, to have her “run” with the McComases and others of that type or to have her dawdle over glasses, tall, broad, or short, in places of general democratic assemblage; and he told her so. I believe it was about here that she began to find him something of a prig and a doctrinaire; and she was not incapable, under provocation, of mentioning her impressions. It was about here, I suspect, that he told her something of Johnny McComas and his origins — at least

## ON THE STAIRS

he once or twice spoke of Johnny with a certain sharp scorn to me. He assuredly spoke of other country clubs on the other side of town which were more desirable for her and equally accessible, save in the material sense of mere miles. Though he took no interest in athletics, nor even in the lighter out-of-door sports, he was willing to join one of those clubs, if it was required of him.

His reference to Johnny McComas was designed, no doubt, to repel her; but the effect, as became perfectly apparent, was quite the contrary. She was interested, even fascinated, by the rise of a man from so little to so much. She found words and words to express her admiration of Johnny's type, and when English words ran short she found words in French. He was *gaillard*; he had *élan*. What was n't he? What had n't he? Bits of bravado, I still incline to think.

No, the McComases were not to be left behind all of a sudden. One day she made another excursion to the outskirts with them; and she reported it to Raymond, with a little air of suppressed mockery, as a perfectly un-

## ON THE STAIRS

objectionable jaunt. She had gone with them to the cemetery. Johnny's mother had died the year before, and he had been putting up a monument in Roselands. This structure, it developed, was no mere memorial to an individual. It was a tall shaft, set in the middle of a large lot. I saw it later myself: a lavish erection (with all its accessory features taken into account) — one designed, as I felt, to show Johnny himself to posterity as an ancestor, as the founder of a family line. Assuredly his own name, aside from the tall obelisk itself, was the largest thing in view.

Raymond took this account of Johnny's latest phase with an admirable seriousness; he thought the better of him for it. He himself was inclined to divide human-kind into two classes, those who had cemetery-lots (with monuments), and those who had not. The latter, of course, are in a majority everywhere. One thinks of Naples and of the sad road that winds up past the Alhambra to — Well, yes; in a majority, of course; and inevitably so in a large town suddenly thrown

## ON THE STAIRS

together by a heaping up of fortuitous and miscellaneous elements. In later years, when things were going rather badly with Raymond, and when consideration seemed to fail, he could always comfort himself with thoughts of the Princes' own monument in that same cemetery. This was another tall shaft in a gray granite now no longer to be found, and had been set up by old Jehiel on the occasion of the reinterment of some infants by his first wife — a transaction carried out years before Raymond was born. Some of the dates on the base of the monument went back to the early thirties. Well, there it stood, with the subordinated headstones of Jehiel and old Beulah, of his own parents, and of the half-mythical babes who, if they had given nothing else to the world, had furnished a future nephew with a social perspective. Raymond, reconsidering Johnny's recent effort, now began to disparage that improvised background, and led his wife to view his own lot — theirs, hers — only a hundred yards from the other. But she could not respond to old Jehiel and Beulah — though she tried to be properly



## ON THE STAIRS

sympathetic over their son and his wife. Still less could she vitalize the infants who had encountered an epidemic on the prairie frontier and had succumbed more than three score years ago. If she thought of any child at all, she thought doubtless of little Albert (now romping about in his first tweed knickerbockers), who would not die for many years, perhaps, and who was like enough to be buried in quite another spot.

But I think she thought, most of all, of the manly, cheerful sorrow of Johnny McComas before the new monument in the other lot.

### III

These were also days of panic. Banks went down and bank officials threw themselves after. The city was thrilled, even charmed, to find that its financial perturbations touched, however slightly, the nerves of London and Paris. I myself was in Algeria that winter: my Elsie and I had decided on three months along the Mediterranean. It was on the white, glaring walls of the casino at Biskra that the news was first bulletined for our eyes. It had

## ON THE STAIRS

a glare of its own, I assure you: for a few days we knew little enough how we ourselves might be standing.

I thought of the Mid-Continent, with its cumbersome counters and partitions done in walnut veneer and its old-fashioned pavement in squares of black and white. I thought too of Johnny McComas's new institution, with so many bright brass handrails and such a spread of tasteful mosaics underfoot. How had they fared? Well, they had fared quite differently. Why should a big, old bank go under, while a new, little bank continues to float. I cannot tell you. I was far away at the time. Perhaps I could not tell you even if I had been on the spot. And to other questions, more important still, I may be unable to give, when the pinch comes, a clearer answer. The Mid-Continent dashed, or drifted, into the rocky hands of a receiver; and McComas's bank, after a fortnight of wobbling, righted itself and kept on its way.

I saw Raymond again in March. The receivership was going on languidly. Prospects were bright for nobody.

## ON THE STAIRS

"All this puts an end to *one* of my plans, anyhow," he said.

"What plan is that?" I asked.

I was reminded that these were also the days of a quickened interest in education. This interest was expressing itself in large new institutions, and these institutions were generously embodying themselves in solid stone — in mullions, groins, gargoyles, finials, and the whole volume of approved scholastic detail. Donors were grouping themselves in "halls" and dormitories round a certain inchoate campus, and were putting on the fronts of their buildings their own names, or the names of deceased husbands or wives, fathers or mothers — so many bids for a monumental immortality.

"I had hoped for a Prince Hall," said Raymond. And he explained that it would have been in memory of his parents.

I must pause for a moment on this matter. I do not believe that Raymond had ever thought, in seriousness, of any such gift. It must have been at best an errant fancy, and if concerned with commemorating anybody

## ON THE STAIRS

concerned with commemorating himself. But I will say this for him: he never was disposed to try getting things out of people, for he hated attempts at trickery almost as much as he detested the exercise of the shrewdness involved in bargaining and dickering. Per contra, he often showed himself not averse to giving things to other people; but the basis for that giving must be clearly understood all round. He would not compete; he would not struggle; he would not descend to a war of wits. His to bestow, from some serene height; his the rôle, in fact, of the kindly patron. Let but his own superiority be recognized — let him only be regarded as *hors concours* — and he would sometimes deign to do the most generous acts. These acts embraced, now and again, the entertainment of writers and artists, either at his home or elsewhere: his fellows — for he was a writer and an artist too. But it was all done with the understanding that there was a difference: he was a writer and an artist — but he was something more. Those who failed to feel the difference were not always bidden a second time.

## ON THE STAIRS

And his fancy for patronage was developing just at a time when patronage was becoming more difficult, awkward, impracticable! But though "Prince Hall" never saw the light, other and humbler forms of patronage came to be accepted by him.

Toward the end of April Raymond and his wife joined one of the clubs which he had brought to her notice. Though in a formative stage, like others, it was good (we ourselves joined it some few years later); and she made it her concern, through the summer, to give it some of those shaping pats which — for a new club, as for a new vase — have the greater value the earlier they are bestowed. She was active about the place, and she became conspicuous.

It was soon seen that she was "gay" — or was inclined to be, under favoring conditions. The conditions were most favoring, it began to be felt, when her husband was not about. A good many thought him stiff, and a few who used obsolete dictionary words pronounced him proud — a term stately enough to constitute somehow a tribute, though a

## ON THE STAIRS

damnatory one. It was soon seen, too, that just as he irked her, so she disparaged him — an open road to others.

One day she gave a lunch at the club — places for a dozen. Johnny McComas appeared there for the first time. It was a plainer place than his own, but I credit him with perceiving that it was much more worth while. Adele McComas did not appear — for a good reason. Those obstreperous twins now had a little sister two weeks old. The wife was doubtless better at home, but was the husband better at the club? If I had been a member at that time, and present, I should have felt like following him to some corner of the veranda and saying: “Oh, come, now, Johnny, will this quite do?” Well, I know what his look would have been — it came later. He would have turned that wide, round face on me, with the curly hair about the temples which gave him somehow an expression of abiding youth and frankness; and he would have directed those hard, bright blue eyes of his to look straight ahead at me — eyes that seemed to hold back nothing, yet

## ON THE STAIRS

really told nothing at all; and would have disclaimed any wrong-doing or any intention of wrong-doing. And I should have felt myself a foolish meddler.

Well, the innocent informalities of the summer were resumed by the same set in town next winter. The memories and the methods of one season were tided over to another. Gertrude was still "gay" — perhaps gayer — and a little more openly impatient with her husband, and a little more openly disdainful of him. Young men swarmed and fluttered, and those who had "never tried it on" before seemed inclined to try it on now.

I take, on the whole, a tempered view — by which I mean, a favorable view — of our society and its moral tone. I am assured, and I believe from my own observations, that this is higher than in some other of our large cities. I dislike scandal, and I have no desire to bear tales. Either is far from being the object of these present pages. Nothing that I present need be taken as typical, as tyrannously representative.

Raymond criticized, expostulated. Friends

## ON THE STAIRS

began to come to him with impressions and reports. I — whether for good or ill — was not one of these. They named names — names which I shall not record here. But it was one of Raymond's own impressions, and a vivid one, which finally prompted him to make a move.

### IV

January found the social life of the town in full swing. We had recovered from last year's financial jolt, and entertaining was constant. Raymond and his wife were invited out a good deal. He was bored by it all; but his wife remained interested and indefatigable. Finally came a dance at one of the great houses. Raymond rebelled, and refused point-blank to go: an evening in his library was his mood. His wife protested, cajoled; and he finally found a reason for giving in.

As I say, they were bidden to one of the great houses — one of the few that possessed an actual façade, a central court, and a big staircase: it had too its galleries of paintings



## ON THE STAIRS

and of Oriental curios before Oriental curios became too common. Its owner was also, with the rest, a musical amateur. He was a man of forty-five, and like Raymond had a wife too many years younger than himself for his own comfort. This lively lady lived on fiddles and horns — dancing was an inexhaustible pleasure. At her dancing-parties, of which she gave three or four a season, her husband would show himself below for a few moments for civility's sake, and then retire to a remote den on an upper floor, well shut out from the sounds of his wife's frivolous measures, but accessible to a few habitués of age and tastes approximating his own.

The question of music of another quality and to another purpose was in the air — it was a matter of endowing and housing an orchestra. Informal *pour-parlers* were under way in various quarters, and Raymond felt disposed, and even able, to contribute in a modest measure. It was his pride to have been asked, and it was his pride, despite untoward conditions, to put up a good front and do as much as he could. An hour's con-

## ON THE STAIRS

fab over cigarettes in that retired little den might clarify one atmosphere, if not another.

The court and its staircase were set with palms, as is the ineluctable 'wont on such occasions and for such places; and people, between the dances, or during them, were brushing the fronds aside as they thronged the galleries round the court to see the Barbizon masters then in vogue and the Chinese jades. As Raymond passed down the stairway, he met his wife coming up on the arm of Johnny McComas.

"She looked self-conscious," Raymond said to me, a few days after. I told him that he had seen only what he was expecting to see.

"And he looked too beastly self-satisfied." I told him that of late I had seldom seen Johnny look any other way.

"Where was his wife?" he asked. I told him she might easily be in the crowd on some other man's arm.

"Why were they there at all?" he demanded. And I did not tell him that probably they were there through his own wife's good offices.

## ON THE STAIRS

That meeting on the stairs! — he made a grievance of it, an injury. The earlier meeting, with Johnny's own wife on his arm, had annoyed him as a general assertion of prosperity. This present meeting, with Raymond Prince's wife on Johnny's arm, exasperated him as a challenging assertion of power and predominance.

"I shall act," Raymond declared.

"Nothing rash," said I. "Nothing unconsidered, I hope."

"I shall act," he repeated. And he set his jaw more decisively than a strong man always finds necessary.

### V

Raymond's mind was turning more and more to a set scene with McComas; some meeting between them was, to his notion, a *scène à faire*. It seemed demanded by a Gallic sense of form: it must be gone through with as a requisite to his rôle of offended husband.

One difficulty was that Raymond fluctuated daily, almost hourly, in his view of his

## ON THE STAIRS

wife — of *the* wife, I may say. To-day he took the old view: the wife was her husband's property and any attempt on her was a deadly injury to him. To-morrow he took the newer view: the wife was an individual human being and a free moral agent; therefore a lapse, while it meant disgrace for her, was, for him, but an affront which he must endure with dignified composure.

Meanwhile the pair saw little of each other, and Albert, puzzled, began to enter upon his opportunity (a wide and lingering one it became) for learning adjustment to awkward and disconcerting conditions.

Well, Raymond had his meeting. Imagine whether it was agreeable. Imagine whether it was agreeable to me, in whose office it was held. Raymond had the difficult part of one who must act because he has deliberately committed himself to action, yet has no sure ground to act upon, and therefore no line to take with real effect. It was here and now that McComas turned his round face four-square to his uncertain accuser, and let loose a steady, unspeaking stare from those hard

## ON THE STAIRS

blue eyes, and declared that nothing had occurred upon which an accusation could justly be based. He was emphatic; and he was blunt; the son and grandson of a rustic.

Nothing, he said. Had there really been nothing? You are entitled to ask. And I might be inclined to answer, if I knew. I simply don't. I was in position to know something, to know much; but everything? — no.

Think, if you please, of the many domestic situations which must pass without the full light of detailed knowledge — knowledge that comes too late, or never comes at all. Consider the simple, willful girl who marries impulsively on the assumption that the new acquaintance is a bachelor. Cases have been known where it developed that he was not. Consider the phrase of the marriage service, "if any of you know just cause or impediment": who can declare that, in a given instance, some impediment, moral if not legal, might not be brought against either contracting party, however trustful the other? Consider the story of the anxious American mother who, alarmed by reports about a

## ON THE STAIRS

fascinating scoundrel under whom her daughter was studying music somewhere in mid-Europe, went abroad alone to investigate. Her letter to the awaiting father, back home, ran for page after page on non-essentials and dealt with the real point only in a brief, embarrassed, bewildered postscript of one line: "Oh, William, *I don't know!*" Neither do I "know." But my account of later events may help you to decide the question for yourselves.

Raymond had set his mind on a divorce. If grounds could not be found in one quarter, they must be found in another. If McComas, that prime figure, was unable to bring aid, then there must be coöperation among the other and lesser figures. Raymond revived and reviewed the tales that had involved several younger men. The more he dwelt on them, the more inflamed he became, and the more certain that he had been wronged.

I did not accompany him through his proceedings — such advice as I had given him near the beginning was the advice simply of a friend. My own part of the great field of

## ON THE STAIRS

the law is a relatively unimpassioned one — office-work involving real-estate, conveyancing, loans, and the like. I suggested to Raymond the proper counsel for the particular case, and there, for a while, I left him.

His wife's parents came on from the East. The mother, after some years abroad, had lately resumed her domestic duties in the land of her birth. The father, who knew all of one subject, and nothing of any other, detached himself for a week or two from the one worthy interest in life and accompanied her. The "street" was still there when he returned. They seemed experienced and worldly-wise in their respective fields and their respective aspects, but they entered upon this new matter with a poor grace. Here was another mother who did not quite "know," and another father who waited, at a second remove, for definite knowledge that did not quite come. First there were maladroit attempts to bring a reconciliation; and afterwards, and more shrewdly, endeavors to gain as much as possible for their daughter from the wreck.

## ON THE STAIRS

Raymond was determined to keep possession of Albert. Mrs. McComas, mother of three, stoutly declared that the mother should have her child. Other women said the same, and maintained the point regardless of the mother's course or conduct. Many women have said the same in many cases, and perhaps they are right. Perhaps they are completely right in the case of a boy of six, who surely needs a woman's care. But it is not difficult, even when material is more abundant than definite, to throw an atmosphere of dubiousness about a woman and to make it appear that she is not a "proper person . . ." So it appeared to the judge in this case, and so he ruled — with a shading, however. Albert might spend with his mother one month every summer — and some financial concession on Raymond's part helped make the time brief. However, she was to have nothing to say about Albert's mode of life through the rest of the year, and nothing (more specifically) about his education.

"That makes him mine," said Raymond.

And he set his lips firmly. He was one of



## ON THE STAIRS

those who set their lips firmly after the event is determined.

I do not know whether Raymond had any real affection for Albert. I do not know whether he realized what it was for a father to undertake, single handed, the charge of a boy of six. I think that what moved him chiefly was his determination to carry a point. However all this may be, I remember what he said as, after the decree, he walked out with Albert's hand in his.

“Well, it's over!”

Over! — as if a separation involving a child is ever “over”!

## PART VI

### I

HIS domestic difficulty left behind, Raymond settled down to a middle-aged life of dignity and leisure — or attempted to. But the trial had rather shaken the dignity, and the sole control of Albert ate into the leisure. There followed, naturally, a period of restlessness and discontent.

Those who imputed no blame to Raymond still felt it unfortunate, even calamitous, that he should not have learned how to get on with a young wife. But there were those that did blame him — blamed him for an unbending, self-satisfied prig who would have driven almost any spirited young woman to desperation. These disparaged him; sometimes — not always covertly — they ridiculed him. That hurt not only his dignity, but his pride.

Some of you have perhaps been looking for a generalized expression of general ideas — for some observations on marriage and divorce

## ON THE STAIRS

which should have the detachable and quotable quality of epigram. Yet suppose I were to observe, just here, that Marriage makes a promise to the ear and breaks it to the hope; or that Divorce is the martyr's crown after the tortures of Incompatibility; or that Marriage is the Inferno, the Divorce-Court the Purgatory, and Divorce itself the Paradiso of human life? You would not be likely to think the better of me, and I should certainly think less well of myself. Though I am conscious of a homespun quality of thought and diction, I must keep within the limits set me by nature, eschewing "brilliancy" and continuing to deal not in abstract considerations but in concrete facts.

Little Albert spent a good part of his time in a condition of bewilderment; he perceived early that he must not ask questions, that he must not try to understand. At intervals he ran noisily through the big house and made it seem emptier than ever. A nurse, or governess, or attendant of some special qualifications was required — even for the short time before he should begin his month with his

## ON THE STAIRS

mother, who was spending some months with her parents in the East. Even the preliminaries for this small event occasioned considerable thought and provoked a reluctant correspondence. His mother — prompted probably by her own mother — wrote on the subject of Albert's summer clothes. She wished to buy most of them herself. The Eastern climate in summer had its special points; also local usage in children's costuming must be considered — in detailed appearance her child must conform measurably to that particular juvenile society in which he was to appear. Then there was the nurse, or governess. Should Albert be brought on by her? And should she, once in the East, remain there to take him back; or . . .?

“Oh, the devil!” cried Raymond, in his library, as he turned page after page of diffuse discourse. “How long is she going to run on? How many more things is she going to think of?”

And she had felt impelled to address him, despite the cool tone of her letter, as “Dear

## ON THE STAIRS

Raymond.” And that seemed to put him under the compulsion of addressing her, in turn, as “Dear Gertrude”! Truly, modes of address were scanty, inadequate.

Well, Albert went East (wearing some of the disesteemed things he already possessed) to be outfitted for the summer shores of New Jersey. His governess took him as far as Philadelphia, where the Eastern connection met him, and “poored” him, sent the woman back home, and took him out on the shining sands. During the child’s absence she made covers for the drawing-room sofas and chairs; the house, bereft of Albert and draped in pale Holland, became more dismal than ever.

Raymond, now left alone, was free to devise a way of life in single harness. He liked it quite as well as the other way. He told himself, and he told me, that he liked it even better. I believe he did; and I believe he was relieved by the absence of Albert, whose little daily regimen, even when directed by competent assistance, had begun to grind into his father’s consciousness. I even believe

## ON THE STAIRS

that the one serious drawback in Raymond's comfortable summer was the need of studying over a school for Albert in the fall.

Raymond spent much of his time among his books. He had long since given up trying to "write anything"; less than ever was he in a mood to try that sort of exercise now. He looked over his shelves and resolved that he would make up a collection of books for the Art Museum. They were to be books on architecture, of which he had many. The Museum library, with hundreds of architectural students in and out, had few volumes in architecture, or none. He visioned a Raymond Prince alcove — those boys should be enabled to learn about the Byzantine buildings, just then coming into their own; and about the Renaissance in all its varieties, especially the Spanish Plateresque. He had a number of expensive and elaborate publications which dealt with that period, and with others, and he resolved to add new works from outside. He resumed his habit of going to book-auctions (though little developed at them), dickered with local dealers

## ON THE STAIRS

who limited themselves to a choice clientèle, and sent to London for catalogues over which he studied endlessly. He would still play the rôle of patron and benefactor. Perhaps he foresaw the time when the Museum would recognize donors of a certain importance by bronze memorial tablets set up in its entrance hall. Well, he would make his alcove important enough for any measure of recognition. It was all a work which interested him in its details and which was more in correspondence than a larger one with his present means.

### II

Before my wife and I left for an outing on the seaboard, news came from that quarter about Gertrude and Albert. Intelligence even reached us, through the same correspondent, regarding Mrs. Johnny McComas. Mrs. Johnny, with her three children, was frequenting the same sands and the same board walk. It was possible to imagine the arrangement as having been suggested by Raymond's one-time wife. See it for your-

## ON THE STAIRS

self. Mrs. Raymond and Mrs. Johnny slowly promenading back and forth together, or seated side by side beneath their respective parasols or under some gay awning shared in common, while their authentic children played about them. What if people — whether friends, acquaintances, or strangers — *did* say, “She is divorced”? There she was, with her own son plainly beside her and her closest woman friend giving her complete countenance. If a separation, who to blame? The husband, doubtless. In fact, there was already springing up in her Eastern circle, I was to find, the tradition of a dour, stiff man, years too old, with whom it was impossible to live.

It is unlikely that Gertrude, at any time — even at this time — would have been willing to rank Mrs. Johnny as her closest friend. But Mrs. Johnny had spoken a good word for her in a trying season, and at the present juncture her friendly presence was invaluable. She could speak a good word now — she was, so to say, a continuing witness. The two, I presume, were seen to-



## ON THE STAIRS

gether a good deal, along with the children, especially Albert; and Mrs. Johnny, coöperating (if unconsciously) with Gertrude's mother, did much to stabilize a somewhat uncertain situation.

It was the understanding that Mrs. Johnny was in rather poor health this summer; the birth of her little daughter had left her a different woman, and the tonic of the sea-air was needed to remake her into her high-colored and energetic self. There was nothing especially reviving in the Wisconsin lakes, to which (placid inland ponds) they had confined their previous summer sojourns: and the vogue of the fresher resorts farther north on the greater lakes had not yet reached them. This year let the salt surf roll and the salt winds blow.

My wife and I, in our Eastern peregrinations, passed a few days at the particular beach frequented by the two mothers. We really found in Mrs. Johnny's aspect and carriage some justification for the incredible legend of her poor health. She walked with less vigor than formerly and was glad to sit

## ON THE STAIRS

down more frequently; and once or twice we saw her taking the air at her bedroom window instead of on the broad walk before the shops. Her boys played robustly on the sands, and would play with Albert — or rather, let him play with them — if urged to. But, like most twins, they were self-sufficing; besides, they were several years older. To produce the full effect of team-work between the families required some perseverance and a bit of manœuvring. The little girl was hardly two.

Gertrude and her mother welcomed us rather emphatically — too emphatically, we felt. The latter offered us politic lunches in the large dining-room of their hotel, and laid great stress upon our *provenance* when we met her friends on the promenade. We seemed to be becoming a part of a general plan of campaign — pawns on the board. This shortened our stay.

The day before we left, Johnny McComas himself appeared. He had found a way to leave his widely ramifying interests for a few odd hours. A man of the right tempera-

## ON THE STAIRS

ment gains greatly by a temporary estival transplantation; and if Johnny always contrived to seem dominant and prosperous at home, he now seemed lordly and triumphant abroad. He "dressed the part": he was almost as over-appropriately inappropriate as little Albert himself. He played ostentatiously with his boys on the sands, and did not mind Albert as one of their eye-drawing party. He, whether his wife did or no, responded fully and immediately to the salt waves and the salt winds.

"Immense! is n't it?" he said to me, throwing out his chest to the breeze and teetering in his white shoes, out of sheer abundance of vitality, on the planks beneath him.

There was only one drawback: his wife was really not well. And he wondered audibly to me, while my own wife was having a few words near by with Gertrude, how it was that a young woman could, within the first year of her married life, bear twins with no hurt or harm, and yet weaken, later, through the birth of a single child.

## ON THE STAIRS

"She does n't seem at all lively, that's a fact," he said, with a possible touch of impatience. "But another two weeks will do wonders for her," he added: "she'll go back all right."

Prepotent Johnny! No doubt it was a drain on vitality to live abreast of such a man, to keep step with his robustious stride.

On the forenoon of the day we left, Johnny was walking with Gertrude and her mother along the accepted promenade. His excess of vitality and of action gave him an air of gallantry not altogether pleasing to see. His wife sat at her window, looking down and waving her hand rather languidly. The Johnny of her belief had come, in part, assuredly, for a bit of enjoyment. She smiled unconcernedly.

### III

Raymond waited back home for Albert, and Albert did not return. We gathered from a newspaper published near the shores of Narragansett Bay that Albert, as his mother's triumphant possession, was now

## ON THE STAIRS

being shown at another resort — and a more important one, judging by his grandmother's social affiliations; also, that Mrs. McComas, who had not done any too well on the Jersey shore, was appearing at the new *plage* — doubtless as the just and sympathetic friend (of social prominence in her own community) who had stood stanch through difficulties unjustly endured. Her husband himself had, of course, returned to the West.

His business called him, even in midsummer. He had his bank, but he had more than his bank. There are banks and banks — you can divide them up in several different ways. There are, of course, — as we have seen, — the banks that fail, and the banks that do not. And there are the banks that exist as an end in themselves, and the banks that exist as a means to other things: those that function along methodically, without taking on any extraneous features; and those that serve as a nucleus for accumulating interests, as a fulcrum to move affairs through a wide and varied range. Of this

## ON THE STAIRS

kind was McComas's. Johnny was not the man to stand still and let routine take its way — not the man to mark time, even through the vacation season. Nor could he have done so even if he had wanted to. But all I need say, just here, is that he came back home again after three or four days, all told, and that any threatened embarrassment was nullified, or at least postponed.

Raymond heard in silence my account of the doings on the Atlantic shore: only a wry twist of the mouth and a flare of the nostrils. But as the weeks went on, and still no Albert, his anger became articulate.

"I shall teach her that an agreement is an agreement," he declared. "She will never try this again."

Albert finally came home, three weeks late; his mother brought him herself. The governess transferred him from the hands of one parent to those of the other; and Raymond had asked my presence for that moment, as a sort of moral urge.

"Who knows," he asked, "what delay she may try for next?"

## ON THE STAIRS

He gave one look at the picturesque, if not fantastic, toggery of his restored child.

"Did you ever see anything like that?" he said scornfully; and I foresaw a sacrificial bonfire — or its equivalent — with Albert presently clothed in sane autumn garb.

Albert was followed, within a week, by a letter from his mother. This was diffuse and circumlocutory, like the first. But its general sense was clear. If Raymond was thinking of putting Albert into a boarding-school . . .

"There she goes again!" exclaimed the exacerbad father. "A matter with which, by hard-and-fast agreement, she has absolutely nothing to do!"

However, if he was thinking of a boarding-school . . .

"A child barely seven!" cried Raymond. "Why, half of them will hardly consider one of eight!"

Still, if he was thinking — well, Mrs. McComas knew of a charming one, an old-established one, one in which the head-master's wife, a delightful, motherly soul . . . And it

## ON THE STAIRS

was just within the Wisconsin line, not forty miles from town . . .

"I see her camping at the gate!" said Raymond bitterly. "Or taking a house there. Or spending months at a hotel near by. Constantly fussing round the edge of things. Running in on every visitors' day . . ."

"Likely enough," I said. "A mother's a mother."

"Well," rejoined Raymond, "the boy *shall* go to school — in another year. But the school will be a good deal more than forty miles from here — no continual week-end trips. And it will not be in a town that has an endurable hotel — that ought to be easy to arrange, in this part of the world. No, it won't be near any town at all. I don't suppose she would take a — tent?" he queried sardonically.

"To some mothers the blue tent of heaven would alone suffice," I said — perhaps unworthily.

"Rubbish!" he ejaculated; and I felt that a word fitly spoken — or perhaps unfittingly — was rebuked.



## ON THE STAIRS

### IV

In due season, Albert went off to school, according to his father's plans; and it was not the school which Adele McComas had hoped to see Albert enter a little before her own boys should leave it. Raymond, after another year of daily attentions to Albert's small daily concerns, was glad to have him away. He did not see his boy's mother a frequent visitor at this school, nor did he purpose being a frequent visitor himself. The establishment was approved, well-recommended: let it do its work unaided, unhindered.

No, Adele McComas never saw Albert at the school of her predilection; indeed, it was not long after the choice had been made that she lost all opportunity of seeing anything at all. She withered out, like a high-colored, hardy-seeming flower that belies all promise, and died when her little girl was months short of four.

Her name was on the new monument within six weeks. It was the third name. That

## ON THE STAIRS

of Johnny's father had lately been placed above that of his mother, and that of his wife was now clearly legible upon the opposite side of the shaft's base. Some of Johnny's friends saw in this promptitude a high mark of respect and affection; others felt a haste, almost undue, to turn the new erection into a bulletin of "actualities"; and a few surmised that had the work not been done with promptitude it might have come to be done in a leisurely fashion that spelled neglect: if it were to be done, 't were well it were done quickly — a formal token of regard checked off and disposed of.

During Albert's first year at his school his mother made two or three appearances. She was exigent, and she showed herself to the school authorities as fertile in blandishments. The last of her visits was made in a high-powered touring-car. Raymond heard of this, and warned the school head against a possible attempt at abduction.

The second year opened more quietly. One visit — a visit without eagerness and obviously lacking in any fell intent, and that was

## ON THE STAIRS

all. It was fair to surmise that this once-urgent, once-vehement mother had developed a newer and more compelling interest.

She had made herself a figure at Adele McComas's funeral — or, at least, others had made her a figure at it. She began to be seen here and there in the company of the widower, and it was reported privately to me that she had been perceived standing side by side with him in decorous contemplation, as it were in a sort of transient, elegiac revery *à deux*, before the monument. It was no surprise, therefore, when we heard, two months later, that they had married.

“That stable-boy!” said Raymond. “After — me!”

The expression was strong, and I did not care to assent.

Instead, I began: —

“And now, whatever may or may not have been, everything is —”

“Everything is right, at last!” he concluded for me.

“And if they — those two — are put in the right,” he went on, “I suppose I am put in

## ON THE STAIRS

the wrong — and more in the wrong than ever!”

He stared forward, across his littered table, beyond his bookcases, through his thick-lensed glasses, as if confronting the stiffening legend of a husband too old, too dry, too unpliant; the victim, finally, of a sudden turn that was peculiarly malapropos and disrelishing, the head of a household tricked rather ridiculously before the world.

Reserve now began to grow on him. He simplified relationships and saw fewer people. Before these, and before the many at a greater remove, he would maintain a cautious dignity as a detached and individual human creature, as a man, — however much, in the world’s eyes, he might have seemed to fail as a husband.

## V

John W. McComas, at forty-five, was in apogee. His bank, as I have said, was coming to be more than a mere bank; it was now the focus of many miscellaneous enterprises. Several of these were industrial companies; pros-

## ON THE STAIRS

pectuses bearing his name and that of his institution constantly came my way. Some of these undertakings were novel and daring, but most of them went through; and he was more likely to use his associates than they were to use him. As I have said, he possessed but two interests in the world: his business — now his businesses — and his family; and he concentrated on both. It might be said that he insisted on the most which each would yield.

He concentrated on his new domestic life with peculiar intensity. His boys were away at a preparatory school and were looking forward to college. He centred on his daughter, a future hope, and on his wife, a present reality and triumph. Over her, in particular, he bent like a flame, a bright flame that dazzled and did not yet sear. He was able, by this time, to coalesce with the general tradition in which she had been brought up — or at least with the newer tradition to which she had adjusted herself; and he was able to bring to bear a personal power the application of which she had never experienced. She found

## ON THE STAIRS

herself handled with decision. She almost liked it — at least it simplified some teasing problems. He employed a direct, bluff, hearty kindness; but strength underlay the kindness, and came first — came uppermost — if occasion seriously required. Life with Raymond had been a laxative, when not an irritant; life with Johnny McComas became a tonic. She had felt somewhat loose and demoralized; now she felt braced.

Johnny was rich, and was getting richer yet. He was richer, much, than he had been but a few years before; richer than Raymond Prince, whose worldly fortunes seemed rather to dip. Johnny could give his wife whatever she fancied; when she hesitated, things were urged upon her, forced upon her. She, in her turn, was now a delegate of luxury. He approved — and insisted upon — a showy, emphatic way of life, and a more than liberal scale of expenditure. He wanted to show the world what he could do for a fine woman; and I believe he wanted to show Raymond Prince.

Gossip had long since faded away to nothingness. If anybody had wondered at John-

## ON THE STAIRS

ny's course — a course that had run through possible dubiousness to hard-and-fast finality — the wonder was now inaudible. If anybody felt in him a lack of fastidiousness, the point was not pressed. The marriage seemed a happy solution, on the whole; and the people most concerned — those who met the new pair — appeared to feel that a problem was off the board and glad to have it so.

Raymond, on the eve of the marriage, had softened things for himself by leaving for a few months in Rome. Back, he began to cast about for some means of occupation and some way of making a careful assertion of his dignity. At this time "society" was beginning to sail more noticeably about the edge of the arts, and an important coterie was feeling that something might well be done to lift the drama from its state of degradation. Why not build — or remodel — a theatre, they asked, form a stock company, compose a repertory, and see together a series of such performances as might be viewed without a total departure from taste and intelligence?

## ON THE STAIRS

The experiment ran its own quaint course. The remodeling of the hall chosen introduced the sponsors of the movement to the fire-laws and resulted in a vast, unlooked-for expense. A good company — though less stress was laid on its roster than on the list of guarantors — went astray in the hands of a succession of directors, not always competent. The subscribers refused to occupy their boxes more than one night a week, and, later on, not even that: the space was filled for a while with servitors and domestic dependents, and presently by nobody . . .

Raymond went into the enterprise. He put in a goodly sum of money that never came back to him; and if he coöperated but indifferently, or worse, he was not more inept than some of his associates. He was displeased to learn that the McComases had given enough to the guarantee-fund to insure them a box. And it offended him that, on the opening night, his former wife, one of a large and assertive party, should make her voice heard during intermissions (and at some other times too) quite across the small auditorium. The



## ON THE STAIRS

situation was generally felt to be piquant, and at the end of the performance people in the lobby were amused (save the few who had the affair greatly at heart) to hear Johnny McComas's comment on the play. It was a far-fetched problem-play from the German, and Raymond had been one of those who favored it for an opening.

"Did you ever see such a play in your life?" queried Johnny. "What was it all about? And was n't *he* the fool!"

McComas — really caring nothing for the evening's entertainment either way — could easily afford a large amount for social prestige, and his wife for general social consolidation. It was little to Johnny that his thousands went up in exacting systems of ventilation and in salaries for an expensive staff; but it was awkward for Raymond to lose a sum which, while absolutely less, was relatively much greater. After a few months the scheme was dropped; the expensive installation went to the advantage of a vaudeville manager; Raymond felt poorer, even slightly crippled, and the voice of the present Mrs. Johnny

## ON THE STAIRS

McComas ran till the end across that tiny *salle*.

This, I am glad to say, was the last of Raymond's endeavors to patronize the arts.

### VI

Albert's last year at his distant school ended rather abruptly. He came home, ailing, about a month before the close of the school year. He was thin and languid. He may have been growing too fast; he may have been studying too hard; he may have missed the "delightful motherly soul" who would have brooded over him at the school first proposed; or the drinking-water may have been infected — *que sais-je?* Well, Albert moped during much of May through the big house, and his mother heard of his return and his moping, made the most of it, and insisted on a visitation.

The child-element, of late, had not been large in her life. Her two tall stepsons were flourishing in absence; she had had no second child of her own; little Althea was nice enough, and she liked her pretty well . . .

## ON THE STAIRS

But there was her own flesh and blood crying for her — perhaps. So she descended on the old, familiar interior — familiar and distasteful — and resumed with zeal the rôle of mother.

Her presence was awkward, anomalous. The servants were disconcerted, and scarcely knew how to take her fluttery yet imperious orders. For Raymond himself, as any one could see, it was all purgatory — or worse. Every room had its peculiar and disagreeable memories. There was the chamber-threshold over which they had discussed her tendency to out-mode the mode and to push every extreme of fashion to an extreme still more daring — for that black gown with spangles, or whatever, had been but the first of a long, flagrant line. There was the particular spot in the front hall, before that monumental, old-fashioned, black-walnut “hat-rack,” where he had cautioned more care in her attitude toward young bachelors, if only in consideration of his own dignity, his “face.” There was the dining-room — yes, she stayed to meals, of course, and to many of them! —

## ON THE STAIRS

where (in the temporary absence of service) he had criticized more than once the details of her housekeeping and of her menu — had told her just how he “wanted things” and how he meant to have them. And in each case she had pouted, or scoffed, and had contrived somehow to circumvent him, to thwart him, and to get with well-cloaked, or with uncloaked, insistence her own way. Heavenly recollections! He felt, too, from her various glances and shrugs, that the house was more of a horror to her than ever, and, above all, that abominable orchestrion more hugely preposterous.

Albert kept mostly to his room. It was the same room which Raymond himself had occupied as a boy. It had the same view of that window above the stable at which Johnny McComas had sorted his insects and arranged his stamps. The stable was now, of course, a garage; but the time was on the way when both car and chauffeur would be dispensed with. Parallel wires still stretched between house and garage, as an evidence of Raymond’s endeavor to fill in the remnant of

## ON THE STAIRS

Albert's previous vacation with some entertaining novelty that might help wipe out his recollection of the month lately spent with his mother. Albert was modern enough to prefer wireless — just then coming in — to “bugs” and postage-stamps; but the time remaining had been short. Besides, Albert liked the theatre better; and Raymond, during those last weeks in August, had sat through many woe-ful and stifling performances of vaudeville that he might regain and keep his hold on his son. His presence at these functions was observed and was commented upon by several persons who were aware of the aid he was giving for a bettered stage.

“Fate's irony!” he himself would sometimes say inwardly, with a sidelong glance at Albert, preoccupied with knockabouts or trained dogs.

Albert spent some of his daylight hours in bed; some in moving about the room spiritlessly. He looked out with lack-lustre eyes at the sagging wires, and seemed to be wondering how they could ever have interested him. His mother, as soon as she saw him, put

## ON THE STAIRS

him at death's door — at least she saw him headed straight for that dark portal. She began to insist, after a few days, that he go home with her: he would be hers, by right, within a fortnight, anyhow. Her new house, she declared, would be an immensely better place for him, and would immensely help him to get well, if — with a half-sob — he ever *was* to get well.

She knew, of course, the early legend of Johnny McComas, and had no wish to linger in its locale.

“You *do* want to go with your own, own mother — don't you, dear?”

“Yes,” replied Albert faintly.

The town-house of Johnny McComas, bought at an open-eyed bargain and on a purely commercial basis, had some time since fulfilled its predestined function. It had been taken over, at a very good price, by an automobile company; the purchasers had begun to tear it down before the last load of furniture was fairly out, and had quickly run up a big block in russet brick and plate glass. Gertrude McComas had had no desire to

## ON THE STAIRS

inherit memories of her predecessor; if she had not urged the promptest action her husband's plan might have given him a still more gratifying profit.

They had built their new house out on the North Shore. At one time the society of that quarter had seemed, however desirable to the McComases, somewhat inaccessible. But the second wife was more likely to help Johnny thitherward than the first. Besides, the participation of the new pair in the scheme of dramatic uplift — however slight, essentially — had made the promised land nearer and brighter. They might now transplant themselves to that desired field with a certainty of some few social relations secured in advance.

They had a long-reaching, rough-cast house, in a semi-Spanish style, high above the water. They had ten acres of lawn and thicket. They had their own cow. And there was little Althea — a nice enough child — for a playmate.

“Let me get Albert away from all this smoke and grime,” his mother pleaded — or

## ON THE STAIRS

argued — or demanded, dramatically. “Let me give him the pure country air. Let me give him the right things to eat and drink. Let me look after his poor little clothes, — if” (with another half-sob) “he is ever to wear them again. Let me give him a real mother’s real care. You *would* like that better, would n’t you, dear?”

“Yes,” said Albert faintly.

It is quite possible, of course, that his school really had scanted the motherly touch.

“You see how it goes!” Raymond finally said to me, one evening, in the shadow of the orchestrion. “And what she will dress him in *this* time . . . !”

The whole situation wore on him horribly. There was a light play over his cheeks and jaws: I almost heard his teeth grit.

A few days later Albert was transferred to his mother’s place in the country. Raymond consoled himself as best he might with the thought that this sojourn was, after all, but preliminary, as Gertrude had herself implied, to the coming month on the Maine coast or at Mackinac. A change of air, a greater



## ON THE STAIRS

change of air, a change to an air immensely and unmistakably and immediately tonic and upbuilding — that, as his mother stated, with emphasis, was what Albert required.

So Albert, by way of introduction to his real summer, came to be domiciled under the splendid new roof of Johnny McComas — a roof, to Raymond's exacerbad sense, gleaming but heavy. Its tiles — he had not seen them, but he readily visualized them — bore him down. He was not obliged, as yet, to meet McComas himself. That came later.

## PART VII

### I

ALBERT recovered in due season — a little more rapidly, it may be, than if he had stayed with his father, but not more completely. His education progressed, entering another phase, and still with the unauthorized coöperation of his mother. During his stay with her she had really wrought no great havoc in his wardrobe, whatever she may have accomplished on a previous occasion. In fact, Albert had reached the point where he dressed in a manlier fashion — a fashion fortunately standardized beyond a mother's whims. In his turn, as it had been with his brothers by marriage, it was now the real preparatory school, with college looming ahead.

By this time Raymond had completely made his belated adieux to æsthetic concerns and had begun to concentrate on practical matters — on his own. They needed his

## ON THE STAIRS

attention, even if he had not the right quality of attention to give. I had my doubts, and they did not grow less as time went on. Raymond was now within hail of fifty, and he added to his long list of earlier mistakes a new mistake peculiar to his years and to his training — or his lack of it.

Briefly, he assumed that age in itself brought knowledge, and that young men in their twenties — even their late twenties — were but boys. The disadvantage of holding this view became apparent when he began to do business with them. He depended too much on his own vague fund of experience, and did not realize how dangerous it might be to encounter keen specialists — however young — in their own field. He was now engaged in a general recasting of his affairs, and they came to him in numbers — bright, boyish, young fellows, he called them. He tended to patronize them, and he began to deal with them rather informally and much too confidently.

The family bank, after languishing along for a liberal time under its receiver, had been

## ON THE STAIRS

wound up, and the stockholders, among whom he was a large one but far from the largest, accepted the results and turned wry faces to new prospects elsewhere. The family holdings of real-estate, on the edge of the central district rather than in it, did not share the general and almost automatic advance in values, and an uncertain, slow-moving scheme for a general public improvement — one that continually promised to eventuate yet continually held off — had kept one of his warehouses vacant for years: its only income was contributed by an advertising company, which utilized part of its front as a bulletin-board. Rents in this quarter kept down, though taxes — more through rising rates than increased valuations — went up. And those two big old houses! Raymond still lived, too expensively in one, and paid interest on a cumbering old mortgage. The other — old Jehiel's — was rented, at no great advantage, to a kind of correspondence school which conducted dubious courses and was precarious pay.

In such circumstances Raymond began to

## ON THE STAIRS

lend an ear to offers of "real-estate trades" and to suggestions for reinvestments. But real-estate, in which almost everybody had once dabbled (with advantage assumed and usually realized), had now become a game for experts. Profits for the few: disaster — or at least disillusionment — for the many. Raymond thought he could "exchange" to advantage, and the bright young men (who knew what they were about much better than he did) flocked to help him. Well, one man in a hundred exchanges with profit; the ninety-and-nine, the further they go the more they lose — onions peeled coat by coat. Thus Raymond, until I heard of some of his operations and tried to stop them. One frank-faced, impudent young chap, who thought he was secure in a contract, I had to frighten off; but others had preceded him.

Investments were offered him too: schemes in town, and schemes — bolder and more numerous — out of town. Some of these had the support of McComas and his "crowd," and turned out advantageously enough, for those on the "inside" — to

## ON THE STAIRS

continue the jargon of the day and its interests; but Raymond sensitively, even fastidiously, stepped away from these, and trusted himself, rather, to financial free lances who often were not only without principle, but also without definite foothold.

“If you would only consult me!” more than once I had occasion to remonstrate. “Who are these people? What organization have they got — what responsibility?”

But though he would dicker with strangers, who took hours of his time with their specious palaverings, he shrank more and more from his own tenants and his own agents. One rather important lease had to be renewed over his head — or behind his back. Still, I do not know that, on this particular occasion, his interests greatly suffered.

Thus Raymond began to approach a permanent impairment of his affairs at an age when recuperation for a man of his deficiencies was as good as out of the question. Further on still he began to suspect — even to realize — that he was unfitted to cope with adults. In his later fifties he began to

## ON THE STAIRS

pat children on their heads in parks and to rub the noses of horses in the streets. With the younger creatures of the human race and with the gentler orders of the brute creation he felt he could trust himself, and still escape disaster. If he found little girls sticking rows of fallen catalpa-blossoms on the spikes of iron fences, he would stop and praise their powers of design. He became susceptible to tiny boys in brown sweaters or infinitesimal blue overalls, and he seldom passed without a touch of sympathy the mild creatures that helped deliver the laundry-bundles or the milk. Especially if they were white: he was always sorry, he said, for white coats in a dirty town.

But such matters of advancing age are for the future.

## II

As regards the affairs of McComas, I naturally had a lesser knowledge. They were more numerous and more complicated; nor was I close to them. I can only say that they went on prosperously, and continued to go

## ON THE STAIRS

on prosperously: their success justified his concentration on them.

As regards his home and his domestic affairs, I can have more to say. My wife and I called once or twice at their new house; with a daughter of twenty-odd, there was no reason why we should not cultivate that particular suburb, and every reason why we should.

Johnny's two sons were at home, briefly, as seniors who were soon to graduate. They were tall, hearty lads, with some of their father's high coloring. One of them was to be injured on the ball-field in his last term, and to die at home a month later. The other, recovering some of the individuality which a twin sometimes finds it none too easy to assert, was to marry before he had been out of college six weeks — marry young, like his father before him. The girl, young Althea, rather resembling her mother, — her own mother, — was beginning to think less of large hair-bows and more of longer dresses. Her father was quite wrapped up in her and her stepmother seemed to take to her kindly.

Johnny, in conducting us over his house,



## ON THE STAIRS

laid great stress on her room. On her suite, rather; or even on her wing. She had her own study, her own bath, her own sleeping porch and sun-parlor. Everything had been very delicately and richly done. And she had her own runabout in the garage.

"The boys will go, of course," Johnny said to us, with his arm about his daughter; "but our little Althea will be a good girl and not leave her poor old father."

Ah, yes, girls sometimes have a way of lingering at home. Our own Elsie has always remained faithful to her parents.

Johnny had chosen to call himself "old" and "poor." Of course he looked neither. True, his chestnut hair was beginning to gray; but it made, unless clipped closer than he always wore it, at least an intimation of a florid aureole of crisp vigor; and his whole person gave an exudation of power and prosperity. No sorrow had come to him beyond the death of his parents — an inevitable loss which he had duly recorded in public. That record had yet to receive another name — and yet another.

## ON THE STAIRS

His wife, who had seemed to begin by bracing herself to stand against him, now seemed to have braced herself to stand with him — perhaps a more commendable wifely attitude. I mean that the discipline incident to a life of success which was not without its rigors had become to her almost a second nature. The order of the day was coöperation, teamwork; in the grand advance she was no straggler, no malingerer. It was a matter of pride to keep step with him; she was now beyond the fear which possibly for the first few years had troubled her — the fear that he, by word, or look, or even by silence, might hint to her that she was not fully “keeping up.” Johnny himself was now rather heavy; for the regimen which they were pursuing he had the strength that insured against any loss of flesh through tax on the nerves. His wife, for her part, looked rather lean — trained, even trained down. As the wife of Raymond, she would probably have lapsed by now into pinguitude and sloth — unless discontent and exasperation had prevented.

After showing us the private grandeurs of

## ON THE STAIRS

their own estate, they motored us to the coördinated splendors of their club. It had been a good club — one of the best of its kind — from the start, and now it had grown bigger and better. Its arcaded porches and its verandas were wide; its links showed the hand of the expert, yet also the sensitive touch of the landscape gardener; an orchestra of greater size and merit than is common in such heedless gatherings played for itself if not for the gossiping, stirring throng; and people talked golf-jargon (for which I don't care) and polo (of which I know even less). Though the day was one in the relatively early spring, things were "going"; temporary backsets would doubtless ensue — meanwhile get the good out of a clear, fair afternoon, if but a single one.

Through all this gay stir the McComases contrived to make themselves duly felt. Johnny himself was one of the governors, I gathered; as such he took part in a small, hurried confab in the smoking-room. Whether or not there was a point in dispute, I do not know; but when he rose and led me

## ON THE STAIRS

forth with his curved palm under my elbow the matter had been settled his way, and no ill-feeling left: rather, as I sensed it, a feeling of relief that some one had promptly and energetically laid a moot question for once and all.

His two tall boys I saw walking, with an amiable air of an habituated understanding, around a billiard-table: "Can you beat them?" asked Johnny proudly, as we passed the open window. His daughter circulated confidently, as being almost a member in full and regular standing herself. She seemed to know intimately any number of girls of her own age, and even a few lads of seventeen or so — an advantage which our Elsie, at that stage, never quite enjoyed, and which, due allowance made for altered conditions, she was somewhat slow in gaining, later.

And about his wife? Well, the slate appeared to have been wiped — if there really had been any definite marks upon it. Assuredly no smears were left to show. Those of the younger generation of seven or eight years before had used the time and arranged their

## ON THE STAIRS

futures, and the still younger were pressing into their places — witness Johnny's own brood. Gertrude McComas was now a self-assured though careful matron — careful, I thought, not to ask too much of general society; careful not to notice whether or no she received too little; careful, most of all, not to let it appear that she *was* careful. Perhaps it was this care which made up a part of her general strain — and enabled her to keep the lithe slenderness of her early figure.

We came back to town — the three of us — by train. Both of my Elsie's were thoughtful. Certainly we were playing a less brilliant part than the family we had just left.

### III

Meanwhile Albert pursued his studies. Though he had not so far to come for a short vacation as the McComas young men, he spent the short vacations at the school. He was at an awkward age, and Raymond, who could see him with eyes not unduly clouded by affection, felt him to be an unpromising cub.

## ON THE STAIRS

He was no adornment for any house, and no satisfying companion for his father. So he passed the Easter week among his teachers.

McComas too saw little of Albert. Those months with his mother were usually worked off at some distant resort, which his stepfather was often too busy to reach. Only once did he spend any of the allotted time in McComas's house. This was a fortnight in that grandiose yet tawdry fabric which had been sacrificed to business, and the occasion was an illness in the family (not Albert's) which delayed the summer's outing. McComas had accepted Albert with a large tolerance — at least he was not annoyed. In fact, the boy's mother, however she may have harassed Raymond, never (to do her justice) pushed Albert on her second husband. So, when the juncture arrived, —

“Why, yes,” Johnny had said, “have him here, of course; and let him stay as long as you like. He does n't bother *me*.”

Well, Albert went ahead, doing his Latin, and groping farther into the dusky penumbra of mathematics. “Why?” he asked; and

## ON THE STAIRS

they explained that it was the necessary preparation for the university. Albert pondered. He began to fear that he must continue learning things he did n't want or need, so that he might go ahead toward learning other things he did n't want or need. He took a plaintive, discouraged tone in a letter to his mother; and she — making an exception to her rule — passed along the protest to McComas. She felt, I suppose, that he would give an answering note.

Johnny laughed. He himself cared nothing for study; and he was so happily constituted, as well as so constantly occupied, that he never had to take refuge in a book.

"Oh, well," he said, broadly, "he'll live through it all, and live it down. I expect Tom and Joe to. The final gains will be in quite another direction."

Raymond had heard the same plaint from Albert, and was less pleased. The boy was clearly to be no student, still less a lover of the arts. Raymond passed over all thought of old Jehiel, the ruthlessly acquisitive, and placed the blame on the other grandfather,

## ON THE STAIRS

who was now in an early dotage after a life-long harnessing to the stock-ticker.

“*I don’t know how he’s coming out!*” was Raymond’s impatient remark, over one of Albert’s letters. “Who knows what *any* boy is going to be?”

Albert accepted his school readily enough as a place of residence. He did not now need, so much as before, his mother’s small cares — in fact, was glad to be relieved from them; nor was he quite advanced enough to profit from a cautious father’s hints and suggestions. I found myself hoping that Raymond, at the coming stage of Albert’s development, might have as little trouble as I had had over my own boy (with whose early career I shall not burden you). Yet, after all, fathers may apprehensively exchange views and cautiously devise methods of approach only to find their efforts superfluous: so many boys come through perfectly well, after all. Simply consider, for example, those in our old singing-class. The only one to occasion any inconvenience was Johnny McComas, and he was not a member at all.



## ON THE STAIRS

The one side of the matter that began to concern Raymond was the money side. Albert cost at school, and was going to cost more at college. His father began to economize. For instance, he cut off, this spring, the contribution which he had been making for years in support of an organization of reformers that had been working for civic betterment. These men, considering their small number and their limited resources had done wonders in raising the tone and quality of the local administration. The city's reputation, outside, had become respectable. But a sag had begun to show itself — the relapse that is pretty certain to follow on an extreme and perhaps overstrained endeavor. The little band needed money. Raymond was urged to reconsider and to continue — the upgrade would soon be reached again. Raymond sent, reluctantly, a smaller amount and asked why the net for contributions was not cast a little wider. He even suggested a few names.

Whether he mentioned the name of John

## ON THE STAIRS

W. McComas I do not know, but McComas was given an opportunity to help.

"See what they've sent me," he said to me one day on the street.

He smiled over the urgent, fervid phrases of the appeal. The world, so far as he was concerned, was going very well. It did n't need improvement; and if it did, he had n't the time to improve it.

"They appear to be losing their grip," he added. "They did n't do very well last election, anyhow."

I sensed his reluctance to be associated with a cause that seemed to be a losing one.

"Well, I don't know," I said. "I'm giving something myself; and if I can afford to, you can."

But he developed no interest. He sent a check absurdly disproportionate to his capacity (he was embarrassed, I am glad to say, when he mentioned later the amount); and I incline to think that even this bit was done almost out of a personal regard for me.

Raymond cut a part of his own contribution out of Albert's allowance, and there was

## ON THE STAIRS

better reason than ever why Albert should not take a long trip for only four or five days at home.

### IV

It is tiresome, I know, to read about municipal reform; most of us want the results and not the process — and some of us not even the results. And it is no less tiresome to read about investments, unless we are dealing with some young knight of finance who strives successfully for his lady's favor and who, successful, lives with her ever after in the style to which her father has accustomed her. But in the case of a maladroit man of fifty . . .

I had asked Raymond to call on me with any new scheme that was taking his attention, and one forenoon he walked in.

He had an envelope of loose papers. He laid some of them on my desk and thumbed a few others with an undecided expression.

"What do you think of this?" he asked. "I've got to have more money, and here's something that may bring it in."

## ON THE STAIRS

It was a speculative industrial affair in Upper Michigan. I saw some familiar names attached — among them that of John W. McComas, though not prominently.

"I'll find out for you," I said.

"I don't want you to find out from him."

"I'll find out."

Raymond fingered his envelope fussily: there was nothing left in it.

"It's all costing me too much. Extras at that school. That big house — too big, too expensive. I can't lug it along any farther. Find me some one to buy it."

"I'll see," I said.

I told him about our visit to the club, two or three months before. I implied, in as delicate and circumambulatory a way as possible, that his one-time wife, according to my own observations, taken under peculiarly favorable, because exacting, conditions, was completely accepted.

"Oh yes," he replied, as if the matter had been settled years ago, and as if he had long had that sense of it. Yes, he seemed to be saying, the marriage had made it all right

## ON THE STAIRS

for her, and had soon begun to make it better for him. Possibly not a "deceived" husband; and no longer so rawly flagrant a failure as a human companion.

"Their house is good, I gather," he went on. "There were some plates of it in the architectural journals. Just how good he does n't know, I suppose — and never will."

"I found him fairly appreciative of it."

"Possibly — as a financial achievement brought about by his own money."

"He's learning some of its good points," I declared.

"There was some talk of having Albert there, just before they went off to the Yellowstone." He frowned. "Well, this can't go on so many more years, now."

I did not quite get Raymond's attitude. He did not want the boy with him at home. He did not want to meet any extra expenses — and Mrs. McComas was assuredly paying Albert's way through mid-summer, as well as eternally buying him clothes. I think that what Raymond wanted — and wanted but rather weakly — was his own will, whether

## ON THE STAIRS

there was any advantage in it or not, and wanted that will without payments, charges, costs.

I disliked his grudging way, or rather, his balking way, as regarded a recognition of the liberality of his former wife's husband — for that was what it came to.

I returned his prospectus. "I'll look this up. How about that company in Montana?" I continued.

"They've passed a dividend. I was counting on something from that quarter."

"And how about the factory in Iowa?"

"That will bring me something next year."

"Well," I said, doubling back to the matter that had brought him in, "I'll inquire about this and let you know."

In the course of a few days I called on McComas. Others were calling. Others were always calling. If I wanted to see him I should have to wait. I had expected to wait. I waited.

When I was finally admitted, he rose and came halfway through his splendors of upholstery to give me an Olympian greeting.

## ON THE STAIRS

"It's brass tacks," I said. "Three minutes will do."

"Four, if you like."

"Three. Frankly, very frankly, is this a thing" — here I used the large page of ornamental letter-press as a word-saver — "is this a thing for an ordinary investor?"

"Ordinary investor" — that is what I called Raymond. Perhaps I flattered him unduly.

"Why," responded McComas, with a grimace, "it's a right enough thing for the right man — or men. Several of us expect to do pretty well out of it."

"'Several'? How about the rank outsider?"

"Anybody that *you* know sniffing?"

"Yes."

"Who?"

"Well — Prince."

"H'm." Johnny pondered; became magnanimous. "Well, it ain't for him. Pull his nose away. I don't want his money."

He knew what he had taken. He may have had a prescience of what he was yet to take. He could afford an interim of generosity.

## ON THE STAIRS

### V

A year or so went on, and we met the McComases at a horse-show. Once more it had become distinguished to have horses, and to exhibit them — in the right place. Althea was with her parents; so was the survivor of the stalwart twins.

Johnny had taken the blow hard. That a son of his, one so strong and robust, a youth on whom so much time and thought and care and money had been lavished to fit him for the world, should go down and go out (and in such a sudden, trivial fashion) — oh, it was more than he felt he could endure. But he was built on a broad plan; his nature, when the test came, opened a wide door to the assimilation of experiences and offered a wide margin for adjustment to their jars. His other son, the full equal of the lost one, still survived and was present to-day; and Johnny, grandly reconciled, was himself again.

Althea had taken the interval to make sure about her hair-ribbon and her skirts. The ribbons had been pronounced outgrown and



## ON THE STAIRS

superfluous, and had been banished. The suitability of longer skirts had been felt, and had been acted upon. Althea was now almost a young lady, and a very pretty one.

I say it without bitterness. The beauties of nature — those trifles that make the great differences — are indeed unequally distributed among human creatures. Not all girls are pretty; not all attractive; not all equipped to make their way. No.

You will assume for yourselves the greenery of grass and trees, the slow cumuli in the afternoon sky, the lively, brightly dressed throngs on lawns and verandas, and the horses; yes, even those were present, somewhere or other.

Gertrude McComas was of the crowd; suitably dressed (or, perhaps, attired), a little less spare than once, and somehow conveying the impression, if unobtrusively, that her presence was necessary for the completeness of the function. She was pleasant with Althea, who had a horse on her mind and a number on her back.

Gertrude had returned from the North

## ON THE STAIRS

with Althea and Albert, a week before Albert's allotted time with her was up, so that they might all be a part of this occasion. Albert was now taller than his father, had begun to gather up a little assertiveness on reaching the end of his preparatory days, had taken his examinations, and was understood to be within a month or so of college.

I cannot say that Althea's skirts, however much thought she had given them, were long to-day. The only skirts she wore were the skirts of her riding-coat. The rest of her was boots and trousers; and she carried a little quirt with which she flecked the dust from her nethers, now and again, rather smartly.

Albert looked — obviously envious, and obviously perturbed. His various knockings from pillar to post had left him without horse and without horsemanship. And here was a young feminine (almost a relative, in a sense; well, was she, or was she not?) who was dressed as he (with some slight differences) might have been dressed, and who was doing

## ON THE STAIRS

(or was about to do) some of the things that he himself (as he was now keenly conscious) had always hankered to do . . . How was he to take it all? — the difference, the likeness, the closeness, the distance . . .

And we — my wife and I — became suddenly, poignantly, even bitterly aware that our Elsie, beside us in her tailor-made, had never been on a horse in her life — and was now perhaps too old to make a good beginning.

After a little while Althea was carried away for her “entry” or “event,” or whatever they properly call it — for I am no sportsman. Some small section of the crowd interested itself about the same time — at least got between us and the proceedings. We saw little or nothing — just heads, hats and parasols. All I know is that, in a few moments, Althea reappeared — I think she had leaped something. Her father was by her side, vastly proud and happy. Her mother (as I shall say for short) arrived from somewhere, with a gratified smile. Her big brother presently drew up alongside on

## ON THE STAIRS

a polo-pony, and gave her a big, flat-handed pat in the middle of her placard, and a handsome young woman, who was pointed out to us as the wife he had married in February, during our fortnight at Miami, reached up to her bridle-hand and gave it a squeeze. And there was a deep fringe of miscellaneous friends, acquaintances and rivals.

“What do you think of our daughter, now!” asked Johnny, loudly and generally, as he lifted Althea down. He looked about as if to sweep together the widest assemblage of praises and applause. Many flocked; many congratulated; but still further tribute must be levied. McComas caught sight of Albert. The young fellow stood on the edge of the thing, staring, embarrassed, shaken to his centre.

“Here, you, Albert!” Johnny cried; “come over and shake hands with the winner!”

And meanwhile, Raymond, off by himself somewhere or other, I suppose, may have been studying how in the world he was ever going to put Albert through Yale.

## ON THE STAIRS

### VI

Business once more!

It ought to be barred. I get enough of it in my daily routine without having it intrude here. Business should do no more than provide the platform and the scenic background for the display of young love, hope and beauty. But here we have to deal with the affairs of a worried and incompetent man half way through his fifties.

Raymond came in one morning, on my summons. His manner was depressed; it was becoming habitually so. I tried to cheer him with indifferent topics,—among them the horse-show, which I saw so unsatisfactorily and which I have described so inadequately. He had already heard about it from Albert, and he felt no relish for the friendliness Johnny McComas had displayed on that occasion.

“Trying to get *him*, too?” was Raymond’s comment.

“Oh, I would n’t quite say *that* . . .”

“I have a letter from his mother. She wants to know about college.”

## ON THE STAIRS

"Well, how *are* things?"

"Oh, I don't know; poor."

"That Iowa company?"

"Next year."

"Again?"

"Yes — next year; as usual."

"Well, I have news for you."

"Good?" he asked, picking up a little.

"That depends on how you look at it. I have a buyer for your house."

"Thank God!"

"Don't hurry to thank God. Perhaps you will want to thank the Devil."

Raymond's face fell. "You don't mean that *he* — on top of everything else — has come forward to — ?"

"My friend! my friend! It is n't that at all. 'He' has nothing to do with it. Quite another party."

And it was. A Mr. Gluckstein, a sort of impresario made suddenly rich by a few seasons with fiddlers and prima donnas, was the man. He was willing, he said, — and I paid the news out as evenly and considerately as I could, — he was willing to take the house

## ON THE STAIRS

and assume the mortgage — but he asked a bonus of five thousand dollars for doing it.

“The scoundrell!” groaned Raymond, his face twisted by contemptuous rage. “The impudent scoundrell!”

“Possibly so. But that is his offer — and the only one. And it is his best.”

Raymond sat with his eyes on the floor. He was afraid to let me see his face. He hated the house — it was an incubus, a millstone; but —

He visibly despaired. “What shall I do about Albert’s college, now?” he muttered presently.

He seemed to have passed at a bound beyond the stage of sale and transfer. The odious property was off his hands — and every hope of a spare dollar had gone with it.

“His mother writes —” began Raymond.

“Yes?”

“She tells me — Well, her father died last month, it seems, and she is expecting something out of his estate. . . .”

“Estate? Is there one?”

“Who can say? A man in that business!

## ON THE STAIRS

There might be something; there might be nothing or less. And it might take a year or more to get it."

"And if there is anything?"

"She says she will look after Albert's first year or two. I was about to refuse, but I expect I shall have to listen now."

He was silent. Then he broke out: —

"But there won't be. That old woman with her water-waves and her wrinkles is still hanging on; even if there should be anything, she would be the one to get most of it. I know her — she would snatch it all!"

"Listen, Raymond," I said; "you had better let *me* help you here."

"I don't want you to. There must be some way to manage."

He fell into thought.

"I doubt if she can do anything, herself. Whatever she did would come through him in the end. You say he likes Albert?" He was silent again. "I don't want to meet either of them — but I would about as soon meet him as her."



## ON THE STAIRS

I saw that he was nerving himself for another *scène à faire*. Well, it would be less trying than the first one. If his sense of form, his *flair* for fatalism, still persisted, ease was out of the question and no surrogate could serve.

Perhaps, after all, there had been nothing between those two. Anyway, in the general eye the marriage had made everything right. She was accepted, certainly. And as certainly he had lived down, if he had ever possessed it, the reputation of a hapless husband.

He wrote to her in a non-committal way — a letter which left loopholes, room for accommodation. Her reply suggested that he call at the bank; she would pass on the word. He told me he would try to do so. I saw the impudent concert-monger was to have his house.

And so, one forenoon, at eleven or so, Raymond, after some self-drivings, reached the bank; by appointment, as he understood. Through the big doors; up the wide, balustraded stairway — it was the first time he

## ON THE STAIRS

had ever been in the place. He was well on the way to the broad, square landing, when some lively clerks or messengers, who had been springing along behind him, all at once slackened their pace and began to skirt the paneled marble walls. A number of prosperous middle-aged and elderly men were coming down together in a compact group. It seemed as if some directors' meeting was in progress — in progress from one office, or one building, to another. In the middle of the group was John W. McComas.

He was absorbed, abstracted. Raymond, like some of the other up-farers, had gained the landing, and like them now stood a little to one side. McComas looked out at him with no particular expression and indeed with no markedness of attention.

"How do you do?" he said indifferently.

"I'm pretty well," said Raymond dispiritedly.

"And that was all!" he reported next day in a high state of indignation. "Don't suppose I shall try it again!"

But a careless Gertrude had failed to in-

## ON THE STAIRS

form her husband of the appointment. She had been busy, or he had been away from home . . .

“Go once more,” I counseled, I pleaded.

A note came to him from McComas — a decent, a civil. Come and talk things over — that was its purport. He went.

McComas, as you can guess, was very bland, very expansive, very magnanimous (to his own sense). “I *like* Albert!” he declared heartily. But he did little to cloak the fact that it was his own money which was to carry the boy through college.

Raymond was in the depths for a month. After Gluckstein had got his deed for the house and Albert had packed his trunk for the East, he felt that now indeed he had lost wife, home and son.

## PART VIII

### I

BEFORE leaving his house for good and all, Raymond spent a dismal fortnight in going over old papers — out-of-date documents which once had interested his father and grandfather, books, diaries and memoranda which had occupied his own youthful days: the slowly deposited, encumbering sediment of three generations, long in one place. There were several faded agreements with the signature of the ineffable individual who had married into the family, had received a quitclaim to those suburban acres, and had then, at a point of stress, refused to give them back. There were sheaves of old receipted bills — among them one for the set of parlor furniture in the best (or the worst) style of the Second Empire. There were drafts of Raymond's early compositions — his first attempts at the essay and the short story; there was an ancient, heavily annotated

## ON THE STAIRS

Virgil (only six books), and there was a sheepskin algebra in which he had taken, by himself, a post-school course as a means of intellectual tonic, with extra problems dexterously worked out and inserted on bits of blue paper . . .

"I filled the furnace seven times," he said to me, laconically.

I myself felt the strain of it all. It is less wearing to move every two or three years, as most of us do, than to move but once — near the end of a long life, of a succession of lives.

I never asked what Mr. Gluckstein thought of the orchestration.

Raymond went to live at a sort of private hotel. Here he read and wrote. He carried with him a set of little red guide-books, long, long since out of date, and he restudied Europe in the light of early memories. He also subscribed to a branch of a public library in the vicinity — a vicinity that seemed on the far edge of things. However, the tendency of the town has always been centrifugal. Many of our worthies, if they have held on to

## ON THE STAIRS

life long enough, have had to make the same disconcerting trek.

From this retreat Raymond occasionally issued to concerts and picture-exhibitions. I do not know that he was greatly concerned for them; but they carried on a familiar tradition and gave employment still to a failing momentum.

From this same retreat there would issue, about the Christmas season, a few water-colors on Italian subjects. If they were faint and feeble, I shall not say so. We ourselves have one of them — an indecisive view of the ruins in the Roman Forum. It is not quite the Forum I recall; but then, as we know, the Roman Forum, for the past half-century, has altered almost from year to year.

Letters reached him occasionally from Albert the freshman. They might well have come from Albert the sophomore. Raymond showed me one of them on an evening when I had called to see him in his new quarters.

He was comfortable enough and snug. On the walls and shelves were books and pic-

## ON THE STAIRS

tures that I remembered seeing in his boyhood bedroom.

"I like it here," he said emphatically. And in truth it was the den of a born bachelor — one who had discovered himself too late.

Well, Raymond passed me Albert's letter. He showed it to me, not with pride, but (as was evident from the questioning eye he kept on my face) with a view to learning what I thought of it. He was asking a verdict, yet shrinking from it.

Albert was rather cocky; also, rather restless — I wondered if he would last to *be* a sophomore. And he displayed little of the consideration due a father. Clearly, Raymond, as a parent, had been weighed and found wanting. Albert's ideal stood high in another quarter, and his life's ambition might soon drive him in a direction the reverse of academic.

"How does it strike you?" asked Raymond, as I sat mulling over Albert's sheets.

I searched my mind for some non-committal response.

"Well," Raymond burst out, "he need n't respect *me* if he does n't admire *him!*"

## ON THE STAIRS

### II

Albert's response to McComas at the horse-show had not been noticeably prompt or adroit, but he cast about manfully for words and presently was able to voice his appreciation of Althea's feat (as it was regarded) and to congratulate her upon it. Johnny McComas was not at all displeased. Albert had not been light-handed and graceful, but he developed (under this sudden stress) a sturdy, downright mode of speech which showed sincerity if not dexterity. The square-standing, straight-speaking farm-lad — straight-speaking, if none too ready — was sounding an atavistic note caught from his great-grandfather back in York State.

"Stuff in him!" commented Johnny. "It's a wonder, but there is. Must be his mother."

Albert made no particular impression, however, on Althea herself. A dozen other young fellows had been more demonstrative and more fluent. He simply slid over the surface of her mind and fell away again. She had known him — intermittently — for years as



## ON THE STAIRS

a somewhat inexpressive boy; now, as a potential gallant, he was negligible, as compared with others. But Albert, speaking in a sense either specific or general, did not mean to remain negligible.

He soon forgot most of the details of the day at the horse-show. He had hardly a greater affinity for sport than his father had had. He began his sophomore year with no interest in athletics. The compulsory gymnasium-work bored him. He made no single team — put forth not the least effort to make one. The football crowd, the baseball crowd, even the tennis crowd, gave him up and left him alone.

Yet his bodily energies and his mental ambitions were waxing daily; his passions too. There must be an outlet for all this vigor — business, or matrimony, or war. In one short twelvemonth he compassed all three.

By the end of Albert's second year, the day had come when a self-respecting young man of fortune and position found it hard if he must confess: "I have taken all yet given nothing." The Great War waged more furiously than ever, and came more close. The country had

## ON THE STAIRS

first said, "You may," and, later, "You must." Albert did not wait for the "must." He closed his year a month or so in advance — as he had done once before — and enrolled in a college-unit for service abroad.

Raymond gave his consent — a matter of form, a futility. In fact, Albert enrolled first and asked (or advised) later. His mother, of a mixed mind, would have interposed an objection. McComas hushed her down. "Let him go. He has the makings of a man. Don't cut off his best chance."

McComas had a right to speak. Tom McComas was going too, and going with his father's warm approval. If he could leave a young wife and a three-year-old boy, need a young bachelor student be held back?

Albert came West for a good-bye. His father held his hand and gave him a long scrutiny — part of the time with eyes wide open, part of the time with eyes closed to a fine, inquiring, studious line. But he never saw what there was to see. In his own body there was not one drop of martial blood; in his being not an iota of the bellicose spirit. Why

## ON THE STAIRS

men fight, even why boys fight — all this had been a mystery which he must take on faith, with little help from the fisticuffs and brawls of school-days, or even from the gigantic, agonizing closing-in of whole peoples, now under way.

Yet Albert understood, and meant to take his share.

Who, indeed, as Raymond had once asked petulantly, could know what a boy was going to be?

When Althea saw Albert in khaki, she *saw* him: this time no indifference, no fusing him with the crowd, no letting him fade away unnoticed. If he had shaken before her on her hurdle-taker, she now shook before him in his brown regimentals. It was as if, in an instant, he had bolted from their familiar — their sometimes over-familiar — atmosphere. He confused, he perturbed her: he was so like, yet so different; so close, yet so remote. Was he a relative, of sorts — a relative in some loose sense; or was he a strange young hero, with his face set toward yet stranger scenes? . . .

“Come,” said her father, who was close

## ON THE STAIRS

by, between the horse-block and the syringa-bushes, "Albert is n't the only soldier on the battle-field. Look at Tom, here!"

Althea turned her eyes dutifully toward her stalwart brother, who humorously put up his stiffened fingers to the stiff brim of his hat; and then she looked back at Albert.

### III

McComas's bank, like others, put its office-machinery at the disposal of the Government, when the first war-loan was in the making. It seemed a small matter, at the beginning, but administrative organization was taxed and clerical labors piled up hugely as the big, slow event moved along through its various stages. This work in itself came almost to seem an adequate contribution to the cause; surely in the mere percentage of interest offered there was little to appeal to the financial public, except perhaps the depositors of savings banks. McComas himself felt no promptings to subscribe to this loan; but his directors thought that a reasonable degree of participation was "indicated." The bank's name

## ON THE STAIRS

went down, with the names of some others; and the clerks who had been working over hours on the new and exacting minutiae of the undertaking were given a chance to divert their savings toward the novel securities. The bank displayed the Nation's flag, and the flags of some of the allies. It all made a busy corner. McComas thought of his son in khaki, and felt himself warming daily as a patriot.

"We can do them up," he declared. The war, with him, was still largely a matter of financial pressure. The pressure, even if exerted at long range, was bound to tell. Many of "our boys" would never get "over there" at all. They were learning how to safeguard our country's future within our country itself.

His wife, who had been flitting from veranda to veranda in their pleasant suburban environment, and been doing, with other ladies of her circle, some desultory work for the wounded soldiers of the future, now came down to the centre of the town and took up the work in good earnest. She saw Tom McComas as a seasoned adult who could look after himself, but her own Albert was still a

## ON THE STAIRS

boy. It was easy to see him freezing, soaking, falling, lying in distress. She busied herself behind a great plate-glass window on a frequented thoroughfare — a window heaped with battered helmets and emptied shells that drew the idle curiosity or the poignant interest of the passer-by. Bandages, sweaters, iodine-tubes filled her thoughts and her hands. And Althea, in company with several sprightly and entertaining young girls of her own set, began to pick up some elementary notions in nursing.

“Why, it’s the most delightfully absorbing thing I’ve ever done!” she declared. A new world was dawning — a red world that not all of us have been fated to meet so young.

Raymond Prince saw all these preparations and took them as a spectacle. He was now frankly but an onlooker in life, and he gazed at big things from their far rim. He had no spare funds to put into federal hands, and felt by no means able to afford the conversion of any of his few remaining investments with a loss of nearly half his present returns. He viewed a patriotic parade or two from the

## ON THE STAIRS

curbstone and attended now and then some patriotic meeting in the public parks — a flag-raising, for example. On these occasions he preferred to stand at some remove, so that it would be unnecessary to raise his hat: the requirement of a formal salute made him distressingly self-conscious. Yet he was displeased if other men, no nearer, failed to lift theirs; and he would be indignant when young fellows, engaged in games near by, gave the exercises no heed at all.

In one of the parades the flag of France went by. This was a picturesque and semi-exotic event; it stirred some memories of early days abroad, and Raymond, with an effort, did, stiffly and with an obvious (even an obtrusive) self-consciousness, manage to get off his hat. A highly vocal young man alongside looked at this cold and creaking manoeuvre with disapproval, even disgust.

“Can’t you holler?” he asked.

No, Raymond could not “holler.” The dead hand of conscious propriety was upon him, checking any momentum that might lead to a spontaneous expression of patriotic feel-

## ON THE STAIRS

ing. The generous human juices could not run — could not even get started. When he said good-bye to Albert, it was not as to a son, nor even to a friend's son. Albert himself might have objected to any emotional expression that was too clearly to be seen; but he would have welcomed one which, cloaked in an unembarrassing obscurity, might at least have been felt. Johnny McComas frankly let himself "go," not only with Tom, but with Albert too. Albert could not but think within himself that it was all somewhat overdone; he was a bit abashed, even if not quite shamefaced. But the recollection of Johnny's warm hand-clasp and vibrant voice sometimes came to comfort him, in camp across the water, at times when the picture of his own father's chill adieux brought little aid.

### IV

A few brief months ended the foreign service of both our young men. Albert came home invalided, and Tom McComas along with others, lay dead between the opposing lines of trenches. His father would not, at



## ON THE STAIRS

first, credit the news. His son's very strength and vigor had helped build up his own exuberant optimism. It simply could not be; his son, his only remaining son, a happy husband, a gratified parent . . . But the truth bore in, as the truth will, and McComas had his days of rebellious — almost of blasphemous — protest. The proud monument at Roselands was taking a cruel toll. His other son was commemorated on the third side of its base; but though a fresh unfrayed flag waved for months over turf below which no one lay, it was long before that great granite block came to betray to the world this latest and cruelest bereavement.

Albert, whose injuries had made him appear as likely to be a useless piece on the board for longer than the army surgeons thought worth while, was sent back home and made his convalescence under the care of his mother; within her house, indeed — for his father had no quarters to offer him. Among McComas's flower-beds and garden-paths he enjoyed the ministrations of a physician other and better than any that practices on those fields of

## ON THE STAIRS

hate — one who complemented the prosaic physical cares required for the body with an affluent stream of healing directed toward both mind and heart. He had come back to be a hero to Althea, with evidences of his heroism graved on his own bruised form.

“Has n’t he been wonderful!” said Althea to her girl friends; and Albert volunteered few concrete facts that might qualify or detract from her ideal.

Those few months comprised his contribution to the cause. He mended more rapidly than might have been expected, and soon began to feel the resurgence of those belligerencies which are proper to the nature of the healthy young male. But his belligerencies were not at all militaristic. He had seen war at short range, knew what it was, and desired it no more. He meant to let loose his energies, as soon as might be, in that other warfare, business; it would be after the manner of a great-grandfather of whom a tradition persisted, and after the close pattern of a McComas still before his eyes. A hero, if they wished; but a hero with money in his pocket.

## ON THE STAIRS

Meanwhile, McComas looked at his grandson and writhed. So many openings, so many things to be done; yet what future aid had he to count on for carrying along his line and for reaping the opportunities in his field? A child of four, in rompers, pushing a little wheelbarrow of pebbles along garden-paths. The years dragged. It was all too great an irony.

He sent for Albert. Albert still limped a little, but it was not to be for long.

"You've done enough for your country," he declared with blunt emphasis. "Now do something for me. You're almost well?"

"I think so."

"You want to pitch in?"

"I do."

"You want to amount to something?" continued McComas, pausing on the edge of an invidious bit of characterization.

"Of course."

"You would like to come with me?"

"Yes." Surely his own father could not help him to a future.

"Well, take your choice. What do you want? Bank?"

## ON THE STAIRS <sup>1</sup>

But Albert had heard something about banks. Bank clerks, in these close-knit days, when anybody who fell out of the lock-step was lost, were but a sort of financial militia. Even if he were pushed along with the friendliest zeal, it might be years before he reached the place and the end desired. Nor had he much more fondness for growing up under the eye of McComas than under that of his own father.

"Bank?" repeated McComas.

"No."

McComas grinned. It was the grin he used when greatly pleased.

"One of those Western concerns?"

"Yes," said Albert; "send me West."

When Raymond heard that Albert had cast in his lot with McComas and meant soon to leave for Colorado, he winced. Albert, to him, was still a boy, and this term in the West but another kind of schooling. "Just as his mother tried to influence him before," said Raymond to me bitterly, "so McComas will influence him now." And I could not deny that McComas had the whip hand.

## ON THE STAIRS

The unintermittency of business correspondence, the cogency of a place on the payroll . . .

No, it was not to be denied that Raymond had lost Albert finally.

And Althea went to the train, to see him off — as to another war.

### V

“Finally” — perhaps I have used the word too soon.

I dropped in on Raymond, one evening, at his private hotel. It was about four months after Albert's departure for the West. His quarters seemed as snugly comfortable as ever, and as completely adapted to his ultimately discovered personality and its peculiar requirements. Raymond master of a big house! Raymond leading a public life!

But he himself was perturbed. It was a letter from Albert — it was two or three letters, in fact.

“He says he is going to marry her.”

“Her?”

“Althea. Althea McComas.”

## ON THE STAIRS

Albert, in the West, had done well. He had taken hold immediately, decisively. The initiative which would never have developed under his father had been liberated during his war service and was now mounting to a still higher pitch among the mountains.

"He is going to do," McComas had told me, after the second month. "He is a wonder," he had said, later.

Be that as it may. McComas was doubtless inclined to the favorable view. He had determined in advance that Albert was to succeed. Albert was meeting, successfully, known expectations of success — as a young man may.

"He started so well," said his father. "And now . . ."

"And now?"

"Now he wants to marry the daughter of a stable-boy!"

"Raymond," I said; "drop the 'stable-boy.' That was never true; and if it were it would have no relevancy here and now."

"I should say not! Why, Albert —"

"You have told him? He knows your — He knows the — the legend?"

## ON THE STAIRS

"He does. And as you see, it makes no difference to him."

"Why should it? Why should he care for early matters that were over and past long years before he was born? He sees what he sees. He feels what he feels."

"He feels McComas."

"Why should n't he? Who would n't?"

Raymond relapsed into a moody silence. I saw, presently, that he was trying to break from it. He had another consideration to offer.

"And then," he began, "about — his mother. He must have understood — something. He must know — by now."

"Know?" I returned. "If he does, he has the advantage over all the rest of us. *I* don't 'know.' *You* don't 'know.' Neither does anybody else. Another old matter — as well rectified as society and its usages can manage, and best left alone."

"Well, it's — it's indelicate. Albert ought to feel that."

"Raymond!" I protested. "We must leave it to the young to smooth over the rough old

## ON THE STAIRS

places and to salve the aching old sores. That's their great use and function."

"Not Albert's," he said stubbornly. "I don't want him to do it, and I don't want it done in that way."

Another silence. I could see that he was gathering force for still another objection.

"It's a desertion," said the undying egoist. "It's a piece of treachery. It's a going over to the enemy."

"If you mean McComas, Albert went over months ago. And he does n't seem to have lost anything by doing so," I ventured to add.

"This marriage would clinch it, would confirm it. I should lose him at last, and completely, just as I have lost — everything."

"Raymond," I could scarcely keep from saying, "you deceive yourself. You have really never cared for Albert at all. The only concern here is your own pride — the futile working of a will that is too weak to get its own way."

But I kept silence, and he continued the



## ON THE STAIRS

silence. Yet I felt that he was gathering force for the greatest objection of all.

"I have heard them spoken of," he said, after a little, "as — as brother and sister. For them to marry! It's unseemly."

"Raymond!" I protested again, with even more vigor than before. "Why must you say a thing like that?"

"The same father and mother — now. Living together — going about together as members of one family . . . They did, you know."

"Yes, for a few weeks in the year. 'One family'? What is the mere label? Nothing. What is the real situation? Everything. Of blood-relationship not a trace. Why, even cousins marry — but here are two strains absolutely different. . . . Have you," I asked, "have you brought up this point with — Albert?"

Raymond glanced at the letters.

"You have! And he says what I say!"

Raymond put the letters away.

Albert had doubtless said much more — and said it with the vigor of indignant youth.

## ON THE STAIRS

### VI

At a wedding the father of the bridegroom need not be conspicuous — least of all when the wedding takes place in a church. He may avoid, better than at a home wedding, too close contact with the various units of the bridal party. In view of such considerations, Raymond Prince was able to be present, with discomfort minimized, at his son's marriage.

We attended, too, of course. My wife has a woman's fondness for weddings — and so has our Elsie.

It came in June. The church was *the* church — the church with the elms and ash-trees around it, the triangular lawn with the hydrangeas and elderberry-bushes blossoming here and there, and the gardens and plantations of private wealth looking across from all sides; the church where everybody who is anybody gets married as a matter of course — at that time of year; the church which has plenty of room for limousines on both sides of its converging streets, and on a third cross-

## ON THE STAIRS

street close by; the church which has the popular and sympathetic rector, who has known you ever since you were a boy (or girl), the competent organist, and the valiant surpliced choir (valiant though small); the church which, under its broad squat tower and low spire, possesses, about its altar-rail, room for many palms and rubber-plants and for as many bridesmaids and ushers as the taste of the high contracting parties may require:— a space reached by a broad flight of six or seven steps, and wide enough for any deployment, high enough for the whole assemblage to see, and grand enough (with its steps and all) to make a considerable effect when the first notes of the Wedding March sound forth and the newly wedded couple walk down and out into married life.

“Be married in your uniform!” Johnny McComas had said effusively.

“Well, I’m not in the service, now . . .” replied Albert.

“You have been, have n’t you? Have n’t you?” Johnny repeated, as if there could be two answers.

## ON THE STAIRS

"Why, I was only a private . . ." Albert submitted.

"So were lots of other good fellows."

"It's soiled," said Albert. "There's a stain on the shoulder."

"All the better. We've done something for the country. Let those people know it."

So Albert walked down the aisle in khaki.

Althea was in white — my wife named the material expertly. She wore a long veil. There were flower-girls, too, — my wife knew their names.

"She's the most beautiful bride I ever saw!" my wife declared. "This is the most beautiful wedding I ever attended!" She always says that.

Johnny McComas was in white, too. As he stood beside the bridal pair he seemed almost too festive, too estival, too ebullient for this poor earth of ours. His wife, whose costume I will not describe and whose state of mind I shall not explore, showed a subdued sedateness — though a glad — which restored the balance.

Raymond Prince saw the ceremony from

## ON THE STAIRS

one of the back pews. If he attended the out-of-door reception at the house, it must have been but briefly: I quite missed him there. For him the wedding proper had been less a ceremony than a parade. I can fancy how he resented the organist's grand outburst and the triumphal descent (undeniably effective) of the bridal party over those six or seven steps. Again he was an unregarded and negligible spectator. I presume he missed Johnny's hand in Albert's, and Johnny's pressure on Albert's shoulder — the one with the stain; and I hope he did. It was the hand of the stronger, taking possession. "My prop, my future mainstay!" said Johnny's action.

And it was as an unregarded and negligible spectator — now his permanent rôle — that Raymond Prince took the slow train back to town.

THE END

**The Riverside Press**

**CAMBRIDGE . MASSACHUSETTS**

**U . S . A**













